FROM BESTSELLING AUTHOR ARISE ZHANG, ALSO KNOWN AS

FEI TIAN YE XIANG

Joyful REUNION

BOOK THREE

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REUNION
BOOK THREE

HUCHANG
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JIANG PREFECTURAL CITY
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Joyful
REUNION
BOOK THREE
相見歡
WRITTEN BY
非天夜翔
FEI TIAN YE XIANG
(ARISE ZHANG)
ILLUSTRATED BY
PORRIDGE
RUTHIE (KKCOOCOOL)
TRANSLATED BY
MIMI, SUIKA, AND YUNYUN
Seven Seas
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TRANSLATION: Mimi, Suika, yunyun
ADAPTATION: Lee Mandelo
COVER & INTERIOR DESIGN: M. A. Lewife
INTERIOR LAYOUT: Karis Page
COPY EDITOR: Jehanne Bell
PROOFREADER: Ami Leh, Hnā, Foxghost
EDITOR: Kelly Quinn Chiu
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Salvador Chan Jr., April Malig, Jules Valera
PRODUCTION MANAGER: Clay Gardner
MANAGING EDITOR: Alyssa Scavetta
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis
PUBLISHER: Lianne Sentar
VICE PRESIDENT: Adam Arnold
PRESIDENT: Jason DeAngelis

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Chapter 82

"I WENT BACK TO Tong Pass first," Wu Du explained as they walked down the mountain road together. He gripped Skychaser's reins in one hand, his other interlaced firmly with

Duan Ling's. "But everyone was gone. I found Yao Jing, and after hearing how things had gone south, I hurried out of the city to search for you. The entrance to the treasure cave was crawling with guards. While I was scouring the area I ran into the Tanguts, and Shang Leguan told me you were captured."

Wu Du looked at him. "I was out of ideas; I didn't know what else to do—so I rode Skychaser up the mountain and just happened to see someone dangling from the cliff. I rushed straight for it. Thank goodness Skychaser led the way, or I would've been too late."

Duan Ling spun and threw his arms around Skychaser's neck. Beside them, Wu Du said, "The late emperor took this mountain road back when he besieged Tong Pass. I can't believe Skychaser remembered it."

"Yeah." Duan Ling gazed at Skychaser, a wry smile playing at the corners of his lips. "I'll have to thank him."

"Why not thank me?" Wu Du frowned, unhappy.

Duan Ling glanced at him sidelong. "Well, what do you want?"

"Wh-what do I want?" Wu Du stiffened at the implication. When Duan Ling moved to nuzzle against him, he quickly peeled him off. "Behave yourself. Let's go, we—we haven't even finished our business yet. What are you thinking?!"

Duan Ling laughed.

Wu Du helped him mount Skychaser, then swung up behind him. "Apparently, only members of the royal family can ride this horse. It's probably thanks to me he's not throwing you off, so watch yourself."

"Right, right," Duan Ling said, though he muttered in his head: *Only people from my family can ride this horse. It's thanks to* me *he didn't throw*

you off, so you *watch yourself.*

After an entire night of peril—and nearly being killed by Helan Jie—Duan Ling's eyelids were heavy. He relaxed back against Wu Du's chest and couldn't help snuggling in closer.

"Stop that," Wu Du said. "I haven't scolded you yet for running out here on your own and putting yourself in danger… *Now* do you know to be scared?"

"Mm-hmm."

Duan Ling greedily breathed in Wu Du's scent. Even through the dust and dirt from travel, the smell comforted him. Skychaser trotted steadily down the mountain path, and above them spread the brilliant, shimmering tapestry of stars stretching all the way to the end of Qin Ridge.

With Wu Du returned to his side, it was as though there was nothing in the world left to fear. That sense of security, long lost, crept back into his heart once more.

"Who was that guy?" Duan Ling asked Wu Du. He still had no clue who the man in black who'd fought Helan Jie was, but judging by the look on Wu Du's face, he was even more lost. Duan Ling added, "Helan Jie called him the Nameless Assassin. Have you heard of him?"

Wu Du was taken aback. He frowned deeply, recalling what Cai Yan had said about Wuluohou Mu's disappearance a month and a half ago. "The Nameless Assassin? Are you sure?"

Duan Ling nodded, massaging his sore wrists. They'd been rubbed raw by the rope.

"It can't be him," Wu Du muttered. "What's he doing all the way out here?"

"You know him?" Duan Ling asked, surprised.

Wu Du drew in a breath but remained silent in the face of Duan Ling's relentless questions. His thoughts were a tangle.

"Helan Jie said the Nameless Assassin chopped off his hand," Duan Ling said, "so he's searching for him to take revenge. But why would the Nameless Assassin do that?"

“I don’t know.”

“Tell me, who is he?” The Nameless Assassin had, in a sense, saved Duan Ling’s life. Had he not shown up when he did, would Wu Du have fallen into Helan Jie’s trap? It was hard to say. Regardless, the Nameless Assassin had risked his own life to buy Duan Ling time.

A sharp whistle rang out from the distance—the Tanguts’ signal. Duan Ling immediately whistled back. Helian Bo’s men rushed out of the surrounding woods, frantic with worry, only to slow when they saw Duan Ling was safe with Wu Du.

“His Highness is searching the mountain for you,” the head of the guards told Duan Ling in rapid Tangut. “There’s been no sign of Bian Lingbai at the treasure cave. What do you recommend?”

“Stay put for now. I’ll go back to the cave,” Duan Ling replied in the same language.

Bian Lingbai had yet to be dealt with. Duan Ling gave Wu Du a quick summary of his plan: They would attempt to ambush Bian Lingbai when he came to remove the treasure from the cavern. After some contemplation—and in consideration of the fact that neither Bian Lingbai nor Helan Jie posed any real threat in his eyes—Wu Du nodded his approval. “Sounds like you’ve got everything in place already.”

Nonetheless, after another moment of thought, Duan Ling decided to alter the plan after all. Now that Wu Du was back, there was no need to make a bloody mess. He instructed Helian Bo’s men to withdraw from the cave and lurk just beyond the entrance in case something went wrong, then sent a few more to monitor the road to the cave. When Duan Ling and Wu Du reached the Tanguts’ temporary camp, they stopped for a short break before continuing their trek. Wu Du was still ruminating over the Nameless Assassin’s sudden appearance as Duan Ling recounted the rest of what had happened during his absence. When he got to the part about the object missing from the hollow in the treasure cave, Wu Du looked at him in shock.

“Was it the shape of a case, about this big?” Wu Du held his hands apart.

“Yes!” Duan Ling confirmed. Whatever it was, he could tell from Wu Du’s expression that it was important to Wu Du. “A case? What’s inside?”

“Who did it end up with?”

Duan Ling shook his head with a blank look, yet suddenly, Wu Du understood everything. “No wonder that guy showed up here. But how did he know about the treasure map?”

“Who is he?” Duan Ling asked again.

Wu Du gazed at Duan Ling, hesitating. Before he could speak, a commotion erupted: Two Tangut guards were shouting at a masked figure clad all in black, who knocked them aside with barely a glance.

The Nameless Assassin.

Duan Ling unconsciously took a step back as the man in black, wounded from head to toe, staggered into their camp. He looked uneasily toward Duan Ling and Wu Du; Wu Du drew his sword, but the man was unarmed. He reached up and untied his mask, revealing a familiar face: Lang Junxia.

Duan Ling’s mind went utterly blank. The world spun; his throat constricted as fear gripped him, and he clutched at Wu Du’s hand.

The gashes on Lang Junxia’s abdomen, chest, and arms were already blackening from the poison on Helan Jie’s hook, and his lips had turned an unhealthy shade of purple.

“You… You…” Duan Ling could barely speak.

“His Highness ordered me to bring you back dead or alive,” Wu Du said. “I didn’t think you’d be so obliging. Saves me a lot of trouble.”

Bracing himself on a boulder, Lang Junxia said laboriously, “An exchange—for an antidote.” He removed a small sandalwood case from his breast pocket and placed it on the rock.

Wu Du was silent a moment. “That already belongs to me. You’re offering me my own possessions in exchange for my antidote?”

Lang Junxia slipped the prayer beads off his wrist and placed them atop the case. “For your young friend.”

Wu Du went quiet again, but after a few breaths, he took a small ceramic bottle from his own pocket.

“It’s enough for one dose,” he said. “The ingredients are a pain to procure. If you need anything else, you’re on your own.”

Wu Du tossed him the bottle. The second Lang Junxia’s fingers closed around it, he turned and ducked into the thick woods, disappearing as fast as he’d come.

“Wait!” Duan Ling called after him.

He had left without a single backward glance. Duan Ling stood frozen, his head swirling with hundreds of emotions.

Wu Du picked up the case and opened it. Only a thin sheet of silk lay inside, though the case seemed big enough to hold other items.

“What is it?” Duan Ling asked.

“The Mountain and River Sword Manual,” Wu Du replied. “You can’t learn it without the associated cultivation method.”

“What about this?” Duan Ling pointed at a small hollow on the case’s side. It looked like a space for storing medicine.

“A miracle pill,” Wu Du replied. “It can bring someone back from the brink of death. Every one of the Four Great Assassins had one once, but I assume they’ve all been used by now. I looked for this box for a long time—it ended up in Zhao Kui’s hands, just as I thought, and he must’ve hidden it here. But there should’ve been one more item inside it: the Radiant White Tiger Armor Helan Jie was wearing. It’s been lost to the world for so long; I didn’t ever expect to see it again on *him*.”

Wu Du tucked the case away, but held the prayer beads out to Duan Ling. “Come on, let’s go.”

Duan Ling stared at the prayer beads, afraid to take them.

“If you don’t want them, just chuck them.”

Where did the prayer beads come from? Had they belonged to Helan Jie? Duan Ling’s mind was crowded with questions.

“These once belonged to Master Wangbei,” Wu Du continued. “Helan Jie and Master Kongming’s master. They provide protection from poisonous miasma. For him to have removed them means he’s avenged the late emperor—that’s why I gave him the antidote.”

Understanding dawned on Duan Ling. After the death of his father, Lang Junxia had cut off Helan Jie’s right hand and taken the prayer beads worn on his wrist.

“Will Wuluohou Mu die?” Duan Ling felt immensely torn at the prospect.

“No.” Wu Du shook his head. “He’s smart. Both times he was poisoned before, he knew I was the only one who had the antidote—the only one who could save him. The only one who *would* save him.”

The pair mounted Skychaser together and set off again, leaving the camp and climbing the slope that hid the treasure cave. The sky was beginning to lighten. Exhausted, Duan Ling dozed leaning back against Wu Du. Since their reunion, each seemed to have a mountain of things to say to the other, yet neither spoke. Dappled light shone through the foliage as Skychaser carried them through the forest, streaming past them like shooting stars. The autumn wind picked up, rustling the leaves.

When they reached the treasure cave, Wu Du shook Duan Ling awake. “Is this the place?”

Still half asleep, Duan Ling blearily pointed the way. Leaving Skychaser safely outside, the pair descended into the cave. Even before they reached the platform, they could hear the voices of Bian Lingbai and his lackeys on the cliff ledge.

“What do we do?” Duan Ling whispered.

Wu Du settled himself and Duan Ling in a hollow in the cave wall. “Take a nap. I’m dead tired.”

With that, he really did close his eyes. Duan Ling was struck speechless.

Helian Bo’s men had all withdrawn, leaving Wu Du and Duan Ling the only ones hidden on the crags above the platform. Yet after only a short time, a sharp cry near the entrance startled Wu Du from his nap—clearly, someone had fallen off the cliff.

Wu Du cursed in irritation. “They still haven’t found a way down? Really gotta hand it to that guy’s mother for giving birth to such a complete dumbass.”

Duan Ling suppressed a smile; every time Wu Du insulted someone, he found it hilarious. From their hiding spot, they could see a flicker of flame in the distance, where Bian Lingbai was still busy trying to find the path down the cliff face.

After another moment, Wu Du asked conversationally, “Where’s your little Tangut lover?”

“He’s not!” Duan Ling exclaimed. “Why are you so mean to him? He’s a friend—really, just a friend.”

Wu Du eyed him. “Now do you know who’ll actually save you when you’re in danger?”

“Yes!” Duan Ling almost laughed; Wu Du’s constant jealousy was also hilarious.

“So how’re you gonna repay me?” Wu Du looked Duan Ling up and down and leaned back, lazily propping a leg on the wall of their secluded hollow.

Duan Ling happened to be toying with the gold bar he’d taken from the treasure room earlier; he handed it over to Wu Du without hesitation. “Here.”

Wu Du accepted the gold bar and then tossed it into the abyss. Duan Ling’s jaw dropped—that was pure gold!

“Not enough.” Wu Du yawned dramatically, as if bored.

“What else can I give you? I had nothing when you took me in.”

Wu Du crossed his arms and tapped a finger idly against his elbow, waiting for another answer.

“It wasn’t until you came into my life that I…” Complicated feelings welled up in Duan Ling. He thought again of his father. “Wu Du, you’ve been so good to me,” he said. “I really don’t have anything to repay you with. I… Gosh…”

Now it was Wu Du’s turn to feel awkward. He waved dismissively, likely hoping Duan Ling would stop spilling his guts.

“Why *are* you so good to me?” Duan Ling asked.

The question stumped Wu Du, and a pensive expression crossed his face. Then, without warning, he said: “Wang Shan, you’re a heartless person.”

Taken aback, Duan Ling stared at him.

“Do you know why I say that?”

Duan Ling's brow wrinkled. Never in his life had anyone described him as heartless. "Am I really? I…I don't think so."

"Mu Qing is your fellow student, yet when we left Xichuan, you didn't even leave him a farewell letter," Wu Du said, entirely nonchalant.

"That's because I—"

Wu Du stopped him with a raised hand. "Mister Fei always takes you into consideration, yet you never asked him for *his* opinion," Wu Du said.

"That's—"

"Because you don't trust him, right? And that Tangut brat has deep feelings for you. Have you seen his eyes? They speak volumes. When you were kidnapped by Helan Jie, he was so worried he scoured the whole mountain for you, but when you saw his subordinates? You dismissed them with just a few words."

Duan Ling couldn't argue with any of it.

"So tell me: Are you not heartless?" Wu Du finished.

Duan Ling was left speechless, yet Wu Du obviously wasn't the least upset by all the things he'd said.

"But I can tell you're genuine with me," Wu Du said. "That's why I came to save you. Once this is all over, there's something I want to tell you."

On the cliff ledge, Bian Lingbai—at long last—found the dowels. Wu Du and Duan Ling watched from high above as he picked his way carefully down the gallery path leading to the treasure room. Wu Du knotted a rope harness around Duan Ling and motioned for him to wedge himself between two stalactites. "Stand steady and hold on tight to the rock here," he whispered.

Duan Ling nodded. Wu Du wrapped the other end of the rope around his own waist several times, then spread his arms and jumped from the hollow.

Duan Ling's heart lurched into his throat. When the rope ran out, snapping taut, Wu Du's weight yanked him forward; he grabbed the stalactites on either side to keep his balance. Wu Du's knotwork was

ingenious: The binding ropes didn’t hurt him at all. Gripping the stalactites, Duan Ling poked his head out of the hollow and peered down.

Like an eagle soaring through the darkness, Wu Du hovered unseen just over Bian Lingbai’s head. He executed a swift flip and, hanging upside down, sprinkled a dose of powder down Bian Lingbai’s collar. His work complete, he flashed a hand signal at Duan Ling, who used all his strength to begin reeling the rope back in. Wu Du flipped, then flipped again, maneuvering deftly until he had ascended without a sound back up into the hollow.

After Duan Ling untied the ropes, Wu Du whispered, “We’re done. Let’s go.”

Bian Lingbai let out a sudden yelp down below. Before Duan Ling could poke his head out again, Wu Du yanked him back.

“He’s still alive,” Duan Ling pointed out.

“No rush. He’ll be dead soon enough.”

The two climbed out of the hollow and exited the cave. Wu Du located one of the Tangut guards and instructed him to pass word to Helian Bo that he could return to Tong Pass.

The sun was high in the sky by the time they rode Skychaser down the mountain to the main entrance to the cavern. There, they came upon Deputy General Wang speaking with Fei Hongde.

“Mister Fei!”

“You’re back?” Fei Hongde smiled, delighted to see Duan Ling.

“Where’s my uncle?” Duan Ling asked.

“Inside. Went in a quarter of an hour ago,” Deputy General Wang replied. “Huh? Wu Du?”

Wu Du, having previously worked for Zhao Kui, was a familiar sight to Bian Lingbai’s subordinates. Cold and aloof as always, Wu Du gave a curt nod in greeting.

“Back already?” Deputy General Wang asked him.

“Wu Du made a quick trip to Xichuan to run some errands for my uncle,” Duan Ling said, swinging out of the saddle. “I ran into him on the

road on his way back, so we came together.”

Chapter 83

BIAN LINGBAI'S MEN had made camp across the stream from the treasure cave. Given how paranoid he was about the money, Bian Lingbai still hadn't told anyone what was hidden inside. Duan Ling assured the soldiers they could wait where they were. He and Wu Du, leading Skychaser, strolled behind the large tree he'd previously set fire to, where Wu Du bent and washed his hands clean of powder in the stream.

He stuck out a clean hand. "The bead."

Duan Ling took the golden bead from his breast pocket and handed it over. Wu Du set it on the ground, and slowly the bead unfurled back into a gleaming centipede. Roused from its slumber, the little creature began searching for sustenance. Within seconds it seemed to pick up a scent, scuttling over the river rocks and shooting into the tall reeds.

"It's called the golden crow." Wu Du patted Skychaser and released his reins to let him graze. To Duan Ling he said, "Once bitten, the victim won't be able to speak or move. If they don't receive the antidote within twenty-four hours, they'll develop a fever so high their internal organs melt and they die."

Duan Ling recalled the first time he'd seen this centipede. Back then, Wu Du had placed the golden bead on an apothecary's counter to scare the boy peeking over its edge—but now that he knew Wu Du, he knew he'd never kill an innocent child. Wu Du had merely been toying with him.

The powder Wu Du had sprinkled down Bian Lingbai's collar was likely a medicinal blend designed to attract the centipede. Similarly, the pill Wu Du had once given Duan Ling made the centipede sense Duan Ling was one of its own, so that it wouldn't pop out and bite him while tucked away in his robes.

"How long do we have to wait?" Duan Ling asked.

"Not long," Wu Du replied. "It'll bite him within the time it takes an incense stick to burn."

The golden centipede burrowed into the cave. It scuttled across the craggy walls, and in a flurry of moving legs slipped into the treasure room where Bian Lingbai was directing his men to haul the chests away. The glistening gold bars had nearly blinded him. The centipede skittered onto his boot and raced upward, burrowing under his collar at lightning speed. When it reached Bian Lingbai's unprotected back, it bit and broke skin.

Bian Lingbai went swiftly numb, paralysis spreading through his body. He couldn't even cry for help before he fell forward and collapsed onto his mountain of gold. Bars clattered as they tumbled from the stacks. The tenacious centipede clung to Bian Lingbai's body and began to gorge itself on his blood.

"General?"

"General!"

"Call for help!"

Alerted by the clamor, the men rushed to their superior, who was flushed and choked with spittle, unable to speak a word. The guards hauled him out of the cave.

Duan Ling had been chatting merrily with Fei Hongde as the group waited by the stream. As soon as he saw the soldiers emerge with Bian Lingbai, he shouted for everyone to hear, "Uncle! I'm back!"

The soldiers carried their commander toward the stream, and the waiting party—sensing now that something was wrong—hurried over to meet them.

"Uncle!" Duan Ling cried anxiously.

"Put him down here," Wu Du commanded.

Bian Lingbai's face was an alarming shade of red, and he was foaming at the mouth. Wu Du checked his pulse, attempting to diagnose his condition, while Duan Ling shook him by the shoulders.

"What happened in the cave?!" Duan Ling demanded.

The men Bian Lingbai had led inside were simple foot soldiers; his trusted aides had all been left outside. Knowing no better, they stammered their way through their recollection of what had happened: Bian Lingbai had collapsed with no warning right in the middle of inspecting the treasure.

Bian Lingbai was unable to lift even a finger in his own defense, his eyes bulging with fear. If he was momentarily confused as to how his "nephew" Zhao Rong had reappeared when he'd personally kicked the boy down a cliff, the instant his gaze skipped over to Wu Du, he understood. But by then, it was too late.

"Take him back to the residence, now," Wu Du ordered. "Something venomous is lurking inside that cave. Station some men around the entrance and seal off access!"

The paralyzed Bian Lingbai was bundled into the carriage. Fei Hongde climbed in to watch over him while Wu Du and Duan Ling mounted Skychaser together, and the party raced back to the manor.

Dark clouds coasted overhead, rolling in above Tong Pass. Thunder rumbled across the mountain range; the weather was oppressively hot and humid. As soon as the party gained the general's residence, they carried Bian Lingbai into his room and called for a doctor.

Out of all Bian Lingbai's trusted men, only a handful of deputy commanders and a secretary knew of his dire condition. No one dared announce it more widely; those in the know stood in little clusters, whispering among themselves outside the bedroom door.

While they waited, Duan Ling said, "Let me open Uncle's shirt so he can get some air; it's too stuffy in here."

His hands slipped beneath the folds of Bian Lingbai's robes and found the centipede clinging onto the man's side. A light flick of his finger, and the blood-sucking golden crow broke away and curled into a ball, falling back into dormancy. After a good meal, its hard outer carapace glistened with a carmine hue both beautiful and bewitching.

Duan Ling had worried the doctor would spot the signs that Bian Lingbai had been poisoned. But the contrary was true—when the doctor arrived, he was stumped.

"The general has come down with heatstroke," he announced at last.

"To hell with heatstroke!" Duan Ling exclaimed. "Does this look like heatstroke to you?"

With a start, the doctor hastily backpedaled. “This humble practitioner’s medical skills are…inferior. My lord, why don’t you—”

“Go then! Off with you!” Duan Ling said. “Give him some coin and get him out of here!”

The doctor thusly expelled, Wang An, the deputy general who had met them at the cave, entered with an air of anxiety. “What do we do now?”

Duan Ling gave him a look of equal helplessness. He turned back to Bian Lingbai. “Uncle, can you hear me?”

Bian Lingbai remained motionless, his eyes wide with panic.

Of course he was terrified, Duan Ling reflected—he had no idea what Duan Ling wanted from him. All he could do was lie stiff in his bed and wait for death to take him.

“Keep the men steady,” Duan Ling told Deputy General Wang. “News of my uncle’s condition must not get out.”

Deputy General Wang sighed and murmured almost to himself, “What the hell was in that cave?” When Duan Ling didn’t respond right away, he ventured, “Why don’t we send some men to go investigate? Maybe they’ll find some clue for how to cure this.”

Duan Ling glanced at Wu Du. Upon seeing his contemplative expression, he said to Deputy General Wang, “Assemble all the senior officers tonight. I have something important to tell everyone.”

After Deputy General Wang went out, Fei Hongde came in. Seeing that only the three of them were left in the room, he asked, “How much longer does he have? You two shouldn’t just be sitting around here. We should be making preparations to prevent a mutiny when he dies.”

“Twenty-four hours,” Wu Du answered. “Although even when the last hour passes, I can keep him hanging on with drugs a little while longer if needed. Thirty-six hours at most.”

Fei Hongde nodded. Duan Ling couldn’t help stealing another glance at Bian Lingbai. Ever since this man had kicked him off the cliff’s edge, Duan Ling no longer felt an ounce of sympathy for him. All that remained was an odd twinge of unease.

Wu Du produced the imperial decree he had gone to Xichuan to fetch and handed it to Fei Hongde. Once the three had cemented a plan of action, they left Bian Lingbai on the bed and split up to see to their respective tasks.

Clutching the letter from Mu Kuangda, Duan Ling went to find Helian Bo.

His friend was waiting in the Tanguts' courtyard, restless with worry. He didn't know what else had happened since Duan Ling returned safe from his kidnapping. When Duan Ling suddenly showed up at his rooms, Helian Bo hurried forward to meet him.

"For you," Duan Ling said, holding out the letter. "The court has given its consent. Here, you see? Chen and Liang shall forge a bond of brotherhood, never to wage war against one another."

Helian Bo drew the missive from its envelope. He hadn't expected Duan Ling to actually deliver him approval from the prime minister himself, nor that Mu Kuangda trusted Duan Ling to such an extent.

As the last rays of dusk scattered over the yard, Helian Bo called a guard and instructed him to convey the letter back to Wuwei at top speed and hand it directly to the court of Western Liang. They were to prepare to reopen the Silk Road with the aid of Southern Chen and force Helian Da to withdraw his army lurking along the border outside the pass.

"The new governor of Tong Pass will arrive in four days," Duan Ling said. "I've already ordered the news be kept quiet. Yao Jing will depart with her bridal procession tomorrow, and I'll see you off at the same time."

"I'll stay. W-with you. T-together," Helian Bo said.

"No delays," Duan Ling said. "The sooner you go, the sooner I can relax. Who knows when your uncle might attack?"

Stripped of his mobility and with death soon upon him, Bian Lingbai would no longer be making any attempt on Helian Bo's life—so in that regard, he was safe. At this point, what worried Duan Ling more was the hidden army of twenty thousand men that could descend upon them at any time.

“Leave tomorrow,” Duan Ling said seriously. “Do as I ask. We’ll catch up properly next time we meet.”

Left with no other choice, Helian Bo nodded. Wu Du had already arrived to pick Duan Ling up; growing impatient at the long wait, he cleared his throat noisily. Duan Ling smiled at Helian Bo. The two clasped hands. Duan Ling pressed his palm over the back of Helian Bo’s hand reassuringly, then slipped away and hurried off.

The pair returned to Bian Lingbai’s room, where Fei Hongde was still waiting for Tong Pass’s officers to assemble. “There’s one more person unaccounted for in our plans,” he cautioned them. “He may cause a disturbance—we mustn’t lower our guard.”

Somehow, Duan Ling had completely forgotten until this moment—Helan Jie was still alive.

If Helan Jie had been sent by Western Liang, he would surely inform them of their failed assassination plan and ask for new orders. What should they prepare for in that case?

“Wuluohou Mu is already hunting for him,” Wu Du responded on behalf of Duan Ling. “Those two share a blood feud.”

Fei Hongde nodded, his brow wrinkling slightly. “Wuluohou Mu.”

“I ran into him on the summit of Qin Ridge,” Wu Du explained.

“So that was him.” Fei Hongde smiled wisely, seeming to notice Duan Ling’s apprehension. “Did he say anything?”

“No, but he left these,” Wu Du said. He gestured for Duan Ling to show Fei Hongde the prayer beads around his wrist.

“I wonder why he traveled all this way?” Fei Hongde mused.

“Perhaps because some of the White Tiger Sect’s relics are among Zhao Kui’s hidden treasures,” Wu Du said.

Fei Hongde nodded once more and fell silent. In the courtyard outside, the officers were gathering—the two deputy generals, the secretary, the captain of the guard, and several army captains—and their animated conversation was audible even inside the bedroom.

Seeing how nervous Duan Ling looked, Fei Hongde chided him in a whisper, “Do not panic.”

Wu Du brushed a hand over Bian Lingbai’s face, closing his eyelids, before opening the door. Fei Hongde shifted away from the divan, and Duan Ling took a seat beside the desk as the officers poured in.

Once everyone settled, Duan Ling, looking the picture of filial woe, began to speak: “My uncle came down with a terrible fever on the way to Qin Ridge. The doctor claims it’s heatstroke. Sirs, will you please take a look at him and see if there’s anything to be done?”

Bian Lingbai’s eyes were closed, his lips quivering. The redness of his face had subsided, but the centipede’s fiery venom had already blazed through his organs and limbs.

“How did he fall ill so quickly?” Xie Hao, another deputy general, asked. He approached the bed and peeled back Bian Lingbai’s eyelids but was no further enlightened.

Word of what had happened had already spread among the men. Deputy General Wang had seen Bian Lingbai entering the cave with his own eyes, and plenty more had seen the travel-worn Duan Ling and Wu Du hurrying toward the location. Fei Hongde himself had been guarding the entrance. Not a soul suspected Wu Du or Duan Ling could possibly be the culprits. Bian Lingbai trusted no one, and rarely told his officers anything; as a result, none of them had the slightest clue why he would make a trip all the way to some cave on Qin Ridge in the first place, an adventure which had ultimately resulted in him being carried back with a dangerous fever.

Duan Ling looked around at the officers. “Over the next few days, we’ll need to heighten our defenses. Tomorrow, I’ll send Shang Leguan and his party off on behalf of my uncle.”

None of the officers had any objection to this plan. Anyone with eyes could see Bian Lingbai was in a terrible state—the man couldn’t even speak. Despite being warned otherwise, the men were sure to talk once the meeting adjourned. In order to keep the city from erupting into chaos, Duan Ling had prepared a second measure. After dismissing the rest of the officers, he kept the two deputy generals behind.

“Uncles,” Duan Ling began.

“Please—no need to call us that.” The deputies quickly humbled themselves. Although these men were older than Duan Ling by a generation, they didn’t dare name themselves Duan Ling’s seniors, especially with their general still lying there on the bed.

“Tonight, please take some men to the cave and bring one of the chests you’ll find there back to the main hall,” Duan Ling instructed. “You mustn’t publicize your mission, nor leak any news of it.”

The two deputies exchanged a look, as if already concocting a plan. This one glance was enough to convince Fei Hongde and Duan Ling that the deputy generals knew there was gold hidden in the cave. Any officer worth their salt would interrogate the soldiers when their general suddenly fell deathly ill and had to be carted back from the field, and the soldiers wouldn’t have dared to hide anything. It seemed likely that if Duan Ling hadn’t given the order, the pair would’ve snuck out in the middle of the night to divide the treasure among themselves and flee.

“There’s probably no danger lurking inside the cave,” Duan Ling assured them. “I can only assume the hidden chamber had been sealed for too long, and the foul air triggered my uncle’s fever. Regardless, please be careful.”

Deputy Generals Wang and Xie left to carry out their orders.

Once they brought back the chest of gold, Duan Ling could dispense the contents as a reward to settle the wavering hearts of Tong Pass’s army. After all, who would recklessly rebel with gold weighing down their pockets? Mu Kuangda didn’t know the exact number of chests hidden here, so no one would be the wiser if Duan Ling emptied a few of them. And those who received the largesse would surely never tell.

“Tong Pass’s soldiers have been poor for a long time,” Fei Hongde told Duan Ling. “Ever since the late emperor was stripped of his command at Jiangjun Ridge, Great Chen cut back on its military spending, and Zhao Kui was known to have used what was left to line his own pockets. A small show of generosity here is an ingenious move, Shaoye.”

“It’s only because I’ve no other options,” Duan Ling said with a smile. “I hope the new governor will arrive soon. Judging by how things looked this evening, I’m worried something might go wrong. But let’s all take a rest. We can talk more in the morning.”

Chapter 84

AFTER SOME discussion, Duan Ling and Fei Hongde decided to take turns standing watch over Bian Lingbai. Fei Hongde took the first shift. As soon as Duan Ling returned to his room, exhaustion swamped him; the past week had to have been the longest seven days of his life.

Wu Du took a seat on the bed to read through the secret manual Lang Junxia had returned. Duan Ling flopped down beside him and was asleep in moments, but his dreams were restless—nothing but fighting and killing. A year ago to the day, he had been trapped in Shangjing waiting futilely for his last hope. The thunder of chariots and armored horses, the din of weapons clashing and the roaring sea of fire echoed in his ears.

Duan Ling woke in the early hours before dawn. All was tranquil, the stars glittering quietly overhead.

“Wu Du?” he mumbled. He rolled over, but the bed beside him was empty. Duan Ling slipped out from under the covers and tiptoed out of the room.

Wu Du was in the yard, practicing the forms from the Mountain and River Sword Manual. He threw a right punch and opened his fist into a palm as his left pushed forward; he lifted his foot to shift his weight and then reset it, a chain of free-flowing movements. Watching Wu Du stirred memories of Li Jianhong teaching Duan Ling the very same forms. Beneath the starlit canopy of the sky, Li Jianhong seemed to manifest as a shadow behind Wu Du, mimicking his every step.

At that precise moment, Wu Du seemed to have gained a fraction of Li Jianhong’s commanding aura, subtly exuding the majesty and authority of a ruler on high.

“The techniques in the Mountain and River Sword Manual can be applied to punches, open-palm strikes, and kicks,” Wu Du explained as he turned and pressed both palms toward the ground. The left hand pushed away as the right hand lifted. He sidestepped and pushed both palms forward. “Movement is used to train stillness; the internal energy

circulating throughout the body's meridians moves against the flow of the punch or palm strike."

Duan Ling watched a while longer, then stepped down into the yard to join him. When he'd trained in the past, he'd only performed the motions without any deeper understanding. But this time, following Wu Du's lead, he came to understand a bit more of the meaning and purpose behind the techniques. When the practice ended, both were drenched in sweat, but Duan Ling was left feeling more spirited than before.

Despite the early hour, it was stiflingly hot. Dark clouds loomed over the breaking dawn, and the air was sticky as a damp fog veiled Tong Pass. Everyone in the city would soon be dripping with sweat. After changing into a fresh set of robes, Duan Ling said, "I'm going to send off Yao Jing. Accompany me?"

Wu Du nodded. Once both were properly attired, they returned to Bian Lingbai's chamber. Yao Jing was seated at his bedside, talking quietly to Fei Hongde.

Duan Ling nodded to Fei Hongde, then turned to the insensible Bian Lingbai. "Uncle, I'll be giving Jing-er's hand away today."

Bian Lingbai didn't respond, lying as still as a corpse.

Duan Ling led Yao Jing out into the main hall. The steward was already waiting with the proper dowry prepared. Bian Lingbai had no children and was too ill to rise or speak, so the duty of presiding over the marriage handoff fell to his sham of a nephew. Once everyone had taken their places, Bian Lingbai's household welcomed in the groom's party. The first to enter was Shang Leguan, who asked Duan Ling for Yao Jing's hand in marriage. In accordance with tradition, it ought to have been a groomsman who asked first—Duan Ling rejected him categorically.

"Shang Leguan, this is against the rules. What groom would personally come to ask for a bride's hand?"

The crowd chuckled, amused by the exchange. Yao Jing also giggled, peeking out from the screen she sat behind.

Shang Leguan, tall and handsome as he was, didn't mind being the butt of the joke. He smiled and retreated from the room—then reentered the

hall moments later, asking again for Yao Jing's hand. Again Duan Ling rejected him.

"After the third request, you'll be married off to Western Liang," Wu Du murmured to Yao Jing.

Wu Du rarely spoke to anyone aside from Duan Ling. To all others he was a dangerous and mysterious assassin. Yet as far as Yao Jing was concerned, this assassin had once saved her; furthermore, she was Yao Zheng's cousin, so the two shared an acquaintance.

"Thank you, General Wu, for saving my life," Yao Jing whispered from behind the screen.

"You're going far from home. Take care of yourself," Wu Du advised her. "Western Liang can't compare to our Great Chen. But once you become used to life there, things will get better."

"Yes," Yao Jing replied softly.

Overhearing their conversation made Duan Ling strangely emotional. He couldn't help recalling how he had been just as lost when he'd first arrived in Xichuan with nothing to his name. But he knew Helian Bo would treat her well.

For the third request, it was Helian Bo who entered. Without speaking a word, he performed a special bow to Duan Ling, and Duan Ling responded with the same courtesy.

By tradition, the real groom was to come and take the hand of the bride at the third ask. Their audience was shocked by this turn of events, though Duan Ling appeared unfazed. "Take good care of my little sister," Duan Ling said in Tangut, then repeated what he'd said in Han for their listeners.

"Huse," Helian Bo replied. *I will.*

Duan Ling took Yao Jing's hand. He led her out from behind the screen and placed her hand in Helian Bo's. Yao Jing was shocked speechless. She had been under the impression she would marry Shang Leguan; she hadn't expected her fiancé to be the young man she'd known as He Mo.

“Bian-gongzi, c-could there be some sort of mistake?” the steward asked, flabbergasted.

“No mistake,” Duan Ling said, turning to address the room. “This is the prince of Western Liang, His Highness Helian Bo.”

It slowly dawned on Yao Jing that she was about to become a princess consort. Wu Du also appeared baffled. He looked a question at Duan Ling, who simply nodded. “There’s no problem.”

“Let’s go then,” Wu Du replied.

The dowry chests were loaded into carriages. Helian Bo helped Yao Jing climb into hers, then he and the rest of his entourage mounted their horses. When the send-off party reached the gates of Tong Pass, they stopped for a final farewell. Guilt rushed into Duan Ling’s chest as he remembered Wu Du’s description of him: heartless. Maybe he *was* kind of heartless.

“Take care, Helian,” Duan Ling whispered in his ear. “I’ll come and visit you.”

Helian Bo patted Duan Ling’s arm. “M-my letter. Will come soon.”

Duan Ling nodded. When Helian Bo appeared to want to say something more, he made a writing gesture, telling him to put it in the letter. “Go,” Duan Ling bade him.

Even now, he couldn’t relax. Helian Bo wasn’t out of danger yet. He would only be safe once he was back in Western Liang.

The bridal escort wound steadily down the road, but even as the party dwindled into the distance, Helian Bo’s longing gaze never left Duan Ling, reluctant to part from him. Duan Ling waved goodbye from the guard tower. When Helian Bo halted his horse mid-trot in order to mouth something more at him, Duan Ling turned his back and pretended to leave.

Wu Du found their drama funny. Mockingly, he said, “A Tangut barbarian, and a stutterer to boot. He certainly holds deep feelings for you after an acquaintance of a few days.”

Sometimes Wu Du could be far too blunt. Duan Ling resisted the urge to punch him for it. “Is he gone?”

“Not yet,” Wu Du said carelessly. They waited a bit longer, until Wu Du said, “Okay, he’s gone now.”

Only then did Duan Ling turn and gaze after Helian Bo. The bridal escort had shrunk to a dot on the horizon.

Peaks and ridges converging, tempestuous waves raging; the Tong Pass road lay, perilous and forbidding. Helian Bo disappeared into the vast wilderness beyond Tong Pass. Dark clouds roiled in the sky above, churning as they poured over the pass, lightning flashing in their eddies and folds.

“I forgot to pack them umbrellas,” Duan Ling said.

Wu Du laughed.

“Shaoye!” Fei Hongde’s voice rose from the foot of the gates as he climbed the stone steps to the guard tower.

Duan Ling hurried down to assist the panting old man. The second he saw Fei Hongde’s face, he knew it was bad news.

“Report from the scouts,” Fei Hongde gasped out. “The mounted bandits lurking in Qin Ridge have all withdrawn.”

“What scouts?” Duan Ling was perplexed. He didn’t recall issuing any such order.

“I sent them,” Wu Du explained. He turned to Fei Hongde. “Where did they go? Which direction?”

“The bandits have gathered on the eastern side of Qin Ridge,” Fei Hongde answered with a grave solemnity. “I worry they’ve caught wind of General Bian’s incapacitation and plan to launch an assault on Tong Pass.”

This news wasn’t entirely unexpected. Duan Ling had made a thousand plans for this precise scenario: stopping a sudden attack from the other Tanguts. Whatever was bound to happen would happen. Fortunately, the governor dispatched by the court was already on his way—and despite Tong Pass’s current instability, they still had the power to fight back.

Duan Ling and Wu Du exchanged a look. “How long do you think Tong Pass can hold?” Wu Du asked.

“Your mission was to kill,” Duan Ling said. “What comes next is mine. Don’t worry—but you have to follow my orders.”

Wu Du snorted, as if he’d just heard a terrific joke. “And what are those?”

Duan Ling stared fixedly at Wu Du. “Do you trust me?”

A crease appeared between Wu Du’s brows as he gave Duan Ling a critical eye. Suddenly he didn’t recognize the boy standing before him.

“I’ll make the arrangements at once,” Duan Ling said. “If everything goes as I hope, we’ll be able to hold until the new governor gets here—but he won’t be bringing many men. Defense of the pass will still depend on us.”

This was the toughest challenge Duan Ling had yet faced in his life. Now, finally, it was his turn to step onto the battlefield. Regardless of when the new governor arrived, he would have to fight.

“Go on then, tell me. What are you thinking?” Wu Du said. “I don’t mind following your orders.”

“Report!” Another soldier rushed up the stairs of the guard tower. “Generals Wang and Xie have returned. They request a meeting at the general’s residence, Shaoye.”

Duan Ling nodded to Fei Hongde, and the three made their way back. Two large chests of gold bullion sat waiting for them in the middle of the main hall.

“All gold,” Deputy General Wang reported as soon as Duan Ling entered. “A whole fifty thousand taels of gold!”

Duan Ling guessed the two deputies had divided several thousand taels at least between themselves before even bringing the chests into the residence. But he didn’t expose them. Instead, he turned to Fei Hongde. “Sir, will you please summon all officers ranked captain and above to this hall?”

While they waited for the other officers, Duan Ling rolled open a map of the pass. He shot Wu Du a look, then beckoned the two deputy generals over.

“How many men do we have?” Duan Ling asked.

Deputy General Wang was in a buoyant mood, having just pocketed some fresh riches. “Discounting the patrol guards, Tong Pass has twenty-seven thousand men at the ready.”

“Twenty-seven thousand…”

“What’s this here?” Deputy General Wang asked, pointing at the map.

“This is where the scouts report the mounted Tangut bandits are lurking. They’re around twenty thousand strong,” Duan Ling answered. He pointed to the Great Wall, tracing his finger eastward along the map’s surface until it stopped at Tong Pass. “Their forces are spread around the Great Wall, both inside and out.”

Duan Ling observed the two deputy generals’ expressions closely as he spoke. They must’ve known about the bandits operating inside Tong Pass; their presence here was surely part of the deal struck between Helian Da and Bian Lingbai. Helian Da would sell Bian Lingbai horses, and in return, Bian Lingbai would turn a blind eye to Helian Da’s men infiltrating the pass. Otherwise, the brazen attack on Yao Jing’s caravan wouldn’t have been dropped with so little fuss.

As expected, the deputies exchanged an uneasy look. As with the matter of the gold, Duan Ling made no comment. “News of my uncle’s condition has probably leaked by now. I worry the bandits and the regular Tangut forces arrayed around the pass will lay siege to the city in a joint attack.”

Even if Bian Lingbai didn’t keep his men in the loop, there were always signs. The two deputies had obviously guessed at some of his dealings, the consequences of which were unfolding before their eyes. If Bian Lingbai remained seriously ill or passed away, Helian Da wouldn’t be able to collect on his illicit debt. Without a general commanding the army at Tong Pass, it was highly likely Helian Da would take the opportunity to attack.

“Mister Fei has already dispatched a messenger to Xichuan on a fast horse to report the situation here to the court,” Duan Ling continued. “I’ve invited both of you here to ask your opinion: Should we abandon Tong Pass’s defense and run with the money, or should we fortify ourselves here and wait for a new governor to arrive?”

“Shaoye, you jest,” said Deputy General Xie. This man was originally from Yingchuan. He had once commanded the garrison troops stationed at Jiangjun Ridge—a former subordinate of Li Jianhong’s. Even without Duan Ling’s intentional provocation, he would never abandon his post.

“If the Tanguts control Tong Pass, the Central Plains will lose its natural defensive barrier,” Xie Hao said. “In any case, even if we were to run, where would we go?”

Duan Ling shifted his gaze to Deputy General Wang for his answer. The man didn’t seem to possess the same resolve as Xie Hao and merely smiled. “There’s no need to test us, Shaoye. I will be as loyal to you as to General Bian. Only give us your orders.”

That was all Duan Ling needed to hear. “The bandits are gathering to attack Tong Pass from the inside, and I’m sure the army outside is marching for Tong Pass as we speak,” Duan Ling said. “We’ll have to split our forces. Half will launch a surprise attack on the bandits on Qin Ridge as soon as possible, and eliminate them.”

Duan Ling drew the bandits’ most likely route on the map, then looked up. “Which of you will intercept the bandits? Take Wu Du with you.”

Wu Du observed from the side, cool and contemplative.

“I will,” Deputy General Wang said.

Duan Ling handed Bian Lingbai’s commander’s tally to Deputy General Wang. “We must fight a swift battle. Don’t aim to annihilate their entire force; just scatter them using the element of surprise.”

Deputy General Wang nodded and accepted the tally. Duan Ling next turned to Xie Hao. “We need to tighten our defenses. Station troops both inside and outside the pass—be ready to ambush the enemy. For all other arrangements, follow Mister Fei’s orders.”

Just as Xie Hao responded in the affirmative, the officers Fei Hongde had summoned arrived.

Chapter 85

DUAN LING had instructed that the gold bars should be taken from the chests and laid on the tables and courtyard grounds. When the officers arrived, they were shocked by the sight of shimmering wealth.

“Sirs.” Duan Ling addressed the crowd of officers. “My uncle is bedridden with illness. Until he returns to health, I will be taking command of Tong Pass. What you see here are your overdue wages. I’ve reviewed my uncle’s outstanding accounts and understand your salary has yet to be paid. Please come collect it now.”

No one dared to be first to step forward. Duan Ling beckoned them closer, smiling. “Please, don’t be modest—this is only the pay you’re owed. Afterward, I have more to announce.”

The officers shuffled up, and each collected their due in gold bars. With that task completed, Duan Ling began speaking again. “The Tangut bridal escort brought us news that Helian Da, the late king’s elder brother, has long been coveting our Great Chen’s territory. Once word of my uncle’s incapacitation leaks, he is likely to take advantage of the situation and attack the pass. A letter of distress has been dispatched to Xichuan; reinforcements should arrive within the next few days. During this time, I ask for your cooperation in heightening the pass’s defenses.”

The gathered officers all voiced their willingness. After all, though he was seriously ill, Bian Lingbai wasn’t actually dead. Moreover, the two next highest ranking commanders as well as Fei Hongde, the general’s own advisor, were listening to this young man—what else could they do? Each received their orders and left to carry them out. Xie Hao and Fei Hongde left to make arrangements for their defense, leaving Deputy General Wang, Wu Du, and Duan Ling in the hall to discuss the details of the attack on Qin Ridge.

“This peak here”—Duan Ling circled a point on the map—“you can set an ambush anywhere in the valley nearby, but not on the road. There can never be too much deception in war.”

“That mountain road crosses an already treacherous area,” Deputy General Wang countered. “Why not spring the ambush there? Why set traps two li from the end of the valley?”

“It’s *because* mountain roads are ideal for ambushes,” Duan Ling explained. “The bandits will have their guard up along that path, but once they pass through without issue, they’ll let themselves relax. Striking them here, at the mouth of the valley, will put us at the greatest advantage.”

Wu Du shot Duan Ling another complicated look. Duan Ling glanced back, but if Wu Du had questions, he didn’t voice them and merely nodded.

“A trade passed down in the family indeed,” Deputy General Wang said. “Had I known you were so capable in the art of warfare, I wouldn’t have worried.”

“This is just the first step,” Duan Ling cautioned. “Our goal shouldn’t be to eliminate them in the valley. The initial strike is intended to scatter their forces. Once they attempt to reassemble, we’ll deal the fatal blow. Don’t let yourself be drawn into guerrilla warfare with the bandits; they’re too familiar with the terrain. Instead of hunting, we’ll end up the ones hunted.”

“What if they scatter and go to ground?” Wu Du asked.

“Set fire to the hills and smoke them out,” Duan Ling said. He glanced outside at the yard. “It’s foggy and wet just now; the forests will be damp. The bandits won’t be able to remain in hiding once smoke chokes the woods.”

Wu Du nodded again. Deputy General Wang left to make preparations, and Duan Ling took Wu Du by the hand to lead him back to their room. Fei Hongde had sent ahead a set of leather armor for him.

“*This* is the plan you had in mind?” Wu Du groused. “Sending me out and leaving yourself alone in the residence? What if Helan Jie comes back for you?”

“There’s Wuluohou Mu,” Duan Ling replied. “Isn’t he hunting him down right now?”

“But what if?” Wu Du pressed.

“It’s a necessary risk, and one worth taking,” Duan Ling said. “You’ll take Skychaser. Now—put this armor on.”

Wu Du stood in the middle of the room as Duan Ling unfastened his outer robes for him. Just as he was about to slide the armor over his snow-white undergarments, Wu Du raised a hand to stop him.

“I don’t wear armor,” Wu Du said irritably. “What are you thinking?”

“Just put it on! Or else I’ll worry,” Duan Ling pressed. “Didn’t you say you’d follow my orders? It’ll be for two days at most.”

He swiftly tied the knot of the breastplate around Wu Du’s waist, then went down on one knee. Wu Du bowed his head to watch Duan Ling work while he wrapped the battle skirt around Wu Du’s waist and strapped on the knee-covers. Lastly, he retrieved the bracers and slid them onto Wu Du’s arms.

“If anything feels off about Wang An, kill him and take control of his forces,” Duan Ling said. “Keep an eye out for the black-headed geese the Tangut use for communication. Do your best to intercept any messages they send out.”

Wu Du stood stock-still and stared hard at Duan Ling, his brows locked in a deep frown. “How do you know all this?” he mumbled. “Wang Shan, you…”

Duan Ling faltered. Wu Du seized his hand and examined it critically, then gazed into his face, scrutinizing his expression.

“I studied some books on military strategy back at the prime minister’s residence,” Duan Ling answered weakly.

He gazed at the armored Wu Du. He didn’t want to lie to him anymore, but now wasn’t the right time to come clean. War was upon them. If Wu Du learned his true identity now, he would be unsettled—and if his mind was occupied by the knowledge when the army set out, the distraction could put him in danger.

I’ll tell you when you come back, Duan Ling decided.

“If it was only the battle formation, then fine. But when have you ever put on armor? What piece comes first, what comes second—you didn’t get the order wrong at all. Where’d you learn that?”

“I’m impersonating Zhao Rong, aren’t I?” Duan Ling answered without hesitation. “I learned it before we came, so I wouldn’t be seen through.”

Despite his confident words, Duan Ling didn’t dare meet Wu Du’s eyes. Wu Du reached out and lifted his chin, forcing him to look up. He searched Duan Ling’s eyes. The intensity of his attention made Duan Ling nervous, his lips quivering.

In that split second, Duan Ling made up his mind. “When you come back, there’s something I want to tell you too.”

Wu Du stiffened. As he remembered what it was he wanted to tell Duan Ling, an awkwardness came over him. “Um… Okay.” Wu Du released his hold on Duan Ling. He paused briefly, then turned away, saying in a stilted voice, “I’m off, then.”

Duan Ling stepped forward and wrapped his arms around Wu Du’s waist. The pair stood for a long moment before Wu Du added, “Take care of yourself. Stick close to that General Xie if you can. Don’t you dare run off on your own.”

Wu Du set out from the room in large strides, leaving Duan Ling to jog after him. Yet when Wu Du mounted Skychaser, Skychaser refused to move. He twisted his neck to stare at Duan Ling instead, as if waiting for him to climb on as well.

“Hyah!” Wu Du set his heels to Skychaser’s sides. The warhorse whinnied but remained in place.

“You stupid horse,” Wu Du said, scowling.

“Go! Go on, Skychaser!” Duan Ling waved him onward, signaling for him to set off with Wu Du. Only then did Skychaser trot a few paces forward—but even so, he continued peering back at Duan Ling for reassurance. Duan Ling called, “Protect Wu Du!”

Finally, Skychaser turned around and set out, hooves ringing against the pavers as he cantered out of the back courtyard. Duan Ling ran along behind them and jumped onto the wall to see them off, only to find Wu Du still looking back at him from atop the horse.

“Don’t fall!” Wu Du called over the distance.

Amused, Duan Ling took extra care climbing down.

Atop the fortress walls of Tong Pass, Xie Hao and Fei Hongde were deep in discussion. They fell silent as Duan Ling arrived.

“My uncle seems to be faring better,” Duan Ling said, lying without a second thought. “Perhaps time is all he needs.”

In truth, Bian Lingbai would be rotting to death within the next few hours, but Duan Ling couldn’t care less. He needed to stabilize the situation before anything else.

“This plan of yours is risky but feasible,” Xie Hao said. “But if Helian Da doesn’t come, all these preparations will be for naught.”

“Best if he doesn’t,” Duan Ling said, gazing up at the grim, overcast sky. “Is everything ready?”

“Yes,” Fei Hongde said. “Let’s hope for the best.”

Xie Hao glanced at Duan Ling—perhaps wittingly, perhaps not—and left to inspect the defenses, leaving Duan Ling and Fei Hongde alone atop the wall. The flags snapped as the wind picked up.

“Xie Hao hails from Yingchuan. He’s from the same clan as Xie You, the commander of Jiang Prefectural City’s Black-Plated Army. He’s a loyal man,” Fei Hongde said lightly. “There’s no need to be overly cautious of him.”

Duan Ling nodded.

As the two descended the wall, Fei Hongde added, “Xie Hao is a capable general, but he can climb no higher; he’s not marshal material. Wu Du and Xie You, on the other hand, have what it takes. I’ve already instructed Xie Hao to fully support you in your claim.”

Duan Ling was taken aback. So—Fei Hongde had guessed the truth about him after all. If it had been Bian Lingbai, Duan Ling would be worried he’d try to kill him. But with Fei Hongde, Duan Ling was more concerned the old man would invite mortal danger onto himself by helping him.

“I’ve had my suspicions for some time,” Fei Hongde explained. “Now that I’ve seen you arrange battle formations in a style so reminiscent of the late emperor… This threat to Tong Pass, I imagine, will soon be averted, provided everything goes according to plan. Don’t let yourself be ruled by your anxieties. After all, nothing in this world is ever completely certain—but so long as there’s a sixty percent chance of success, it’s worth the risk.”

“Once this is over, will you still stay in Tong Pass, sir?”

“I should be leaving today. I have a pressing appointment with Yelü Zongzhen. I’ve promised to make a trip to Liao to help His Majesty stabilize the political situation there.”

Duan Ling was sorry to see him go. But at the same time, he understood that Fei Hongde was a man with a far-reaching gaze. At present, the four great powers of Liao, Yuan, Southern Chen, and Western Liang all possessed too many unstable elements. As Helian Bo had so recently reminded him, Yelü Zongzhen, the ruler of the Liao Empire, was mired in a power struggle with the Han clan. Even if he did desire a friendly relationship with Southern Chen, his hands were tied.

Fei Hongde had never concerned himself with petty matters of allegiance. His sole ambition was to achieve peace across the land, putting an end to mass killings and senseless conflicts. As a strategist, he moved from country to country, bearing the entire world in mind. The ideal he strove toward was a lofty one that exceeded the ambitions of most.

“We shall meet again,” Fei Hongde told him. He bowed. “Farewell.”

Duan Ling returned the courtesy on instinct; he hadn’t expected Fei Hongde to leave so abruptly. The two parted ways at the gates of Tong Pass: Fei Hongde’s servant was already waiting there, and once they said their goodbyes, Fei Hongde mounted his carriage and left without fanfare.

The instant Fei Hongde was out of sight, Duan Ling was seized by a powerful unease.

As evening set in, muffled thunder rolled across the sky. Deciding to stay on the walls rather than return to wait in the residence, Duan Ling settled into a chamber within the turrets for a nap, still wearing his clothes.

The strident voice of a scout jolted him awake. “Report! A Western Liang army of forty thousand is marching on Tong Pass!”

Duan Ling leapt to his feet and ran out of the turret chamber. The Western Liang army had come, just as he’d expected. Tension seemed to crackle in the air throughout Tong Pass.

“They’re here! How did you know?!” Xie Hao exclaimed.

There was no time to be smug. Duan Ling ordered, “Move out, just like we planned!”

In the gathering dusk, firelight blazed across the hills—every point of light a torch held by a soldier of the Western Liang army. Their cavalry’s hooves were like the steady beat of war drums as forty thousand men filed through the wilderness beyond the fortress walls. Commotion erupted among the defense garrison of Tong Pass as torches flared to life atop the walls.

“Who goes there?!” Xie Hao’s voice boomed as he challenged the approaching enemy.

Duan Ling moved as if to go out the gates, but Xie Hao stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. A moment later, an arrow pierced the suffocating air—flying nearly a hundred paces up to crest the wall—and nailed itself to a wooden pillar with a *thud*. Tong Pass’s archers quickly nocked their own arrows, pulling their bowstrings taut, and shot down at the enemy forces below. The Western Liang army receded like a tide, stopping just outside their range.

Xie Hao ripped off a folded paper tied onto the enemy arrow. It was a loan note Bian Lingbai had given Helian Da, proclaiming that he owed one hundred taels of pure silver for the purchase of Tangut horses. Xie Hao stared at the message in shock.

Below the wall, an enemy captain shouted up in Tangut, “I come on the orders of Grand Preceptor Helian, who’s had news that General Bian has been grievously injured by some villain. Should General Bian fail to recover, we will have no choice but to settle his debts after his death. There are three loan notes in total—I have provided you the first for your inspection.”

In addition to Duan Ling, many of the Tong Pass soldiers also spoke the Tangut tongue, and chatter broke out among them. The enemy captain followed his declaration with a translated version of the same speech.

Another scout rushed up the wall. “Report! Lord Wu Du and General Wang have successfully intercepted the bandits. The enemy has fled to Qin Ridge!”

“Well done!” Duan Ling said. “Get ready to move out.”

Chapter 86

QIN RIDGE SANK into darkness. Just as Duan Ling had predicted, the Western Liang bandit forces had relaxed after crossing the valley unaccosted, then fallen apart completely under the garrison's ambush. The bandits fled into the woods, but Wu Du didn't give chase in the dark. He called his troops to a halt and withdrew along the path of the stream, heading back toward the open plains. There, he left six thousand soldiers and waited for the enemy to regroup.

"Burn the hills," Wu Du ordered.

The soldiers set their torches to whatever dry weeds and trees they could find. Carried by the strong winds, the fire quickly spread eastward toward the ridge. The air was damp and thick with mist, creating an even heavier smoke once the fire caught.

Wu Du's troops had taken control of the only road leading to Tong Pass. Behind them spread the wheat fields where he and Duan Ling had first encountered these very bandits—the same fields the bandits would now have to traverse if they wished to assault the fortress. Upward of six thousand soldiers were scattered across the plains, awaiting Wang An and Wu Du's orders.

"Report!" cried a scout, pelting toward his commanders. "The great Tangut army has reached Tong Pass!"

"Get ready," Wu Du said to Wang An. "Let's end this quickly; we're needed at the pass."

Storm clouds had rolled in, killing visibility in the pitch-black night. Both sides tightened their grips on their weapons. As the flames licked up the hills, the bandits emerged, flushed from their bolt-holes. Battle cries erupted from the woods as the bandits galloped toward the fields.

"Charge!"

As soon as their horses gained the flat of the plain, hidden tripwires caught their hooves and sent them crashing to the ground. The enemy force hastily regrouped, preparing for a second charge; if they couldn't break

through here, they would be stranded, unable to join the main army outside Tong Pass.

But Wu Du was ready for them. Flashblade glinted in his hand as he spurred Skychaser forward, leading the defense troop thousands strong against their enemy. The two forces crashed into one another like tidal waves. Wu Du carved a swath through the fray as if chopping cabbages, felling every soldier in his path. None of the Tanguts were close to being his match with a blade, and by the time the enemy realized Wu Du carried poison as well, it was too late.

Thunder pealed above, its roars muffled by the heavy cloud cover. Lightning streaked across the sky, illuminating the battlefield for the briefest second. In its light, Wu Du's aura seemed to dominate the field, as if he'd ridden down from the heavens themselves as a god of war. He led the assault as they charged directly into the enemy formation. His blade pierced and slashed, his sword qi casting poison powder in its wake as it scythed through the air. He tore through the bandits' forces, leaving a ragged hole behind him, and even when he galloped beyond the protection of his men he remained unharmed.

A large goose took flight amid the chaos of battle, winging toward Tong Pass with an urgent message. Wu Du flung out a hand, hurling darts that twisted through the air; the messenger goose plummeted from the sky. The bandit leader, brandishing a long anti-cavalry saber, charged Wu Du, clearing his path with swings of death.

"We can't stop him!" cried one of the Tong Pass soldiers. "Fall back, quick!"

"Stay in position!" Wu Du barked. "I'll take care of him!"

The bandit chief was a hulking figure, unstoppable as he swung his massive anti-cavalry saber in all directions. Tong Pass soldiers fell in droves before his blade. Just when the tide seemed to be shifting in favor of the Tangut bandits, Wu Du shot forward, Flashblade gripped tightly in both hands.

His sword whistled down at a sharp angle as he cut right for the chief's throat. The chief swiftly blocked with his saber, the grating screech of metal on metal jarring them both as the blades clashed. Yet to Wu Du's surprise, the anti-cavalry saber did not chip.

The two broke apart, and the soldiers around them backed away, giving the combatants a wide berth. Wu Du was panting. He'd used up his poison powder; all he had left was his blade. The two faced each other at a distance of twenty paces, weapons held at the ready.

With a sudden burst of speed, the bandit chief spurred his horse toward Wu Du, raising his saber. Skychaser, hot-blooded creature that he was, didn't wait for Wu Du's command; he sprang forward to meet the enemy.

It was a head-on clash with a formidable foe—one misstep, Wu Du knew, would spell his end. In the past, Skychaser had galloped into countless battles beneath Li Jianhong, always pressing forward without fear. Now, though his rider had changed, Skychaser was still prepared to fight to the death without hesitation.

Skychaser closed the distance in a blink, bringing Wu Du face- to-face with the bandit chief. The anti-cavalry saber swung down with enough force to split the earth beneath their feet. Wu Du responded with a technique from the Mountain and River style, opening his left hand with his brass knuckle to catch the strike while his right swung Flashblade in a vicious slash. The saber slammed down on his palm; blood splattered. But in the same breath, Wu Du's Flashblade plunged into the chief's heart. Carried by the strike's momentum, the bandit flew backward off his horse, his leather armor and the flesh beneath cleaved cleanly in two.

Wu Du was an assassin; he had never fought head-to-head on the battlefield like this. He gasped for breath, his chest heaving violently. Skychaser wheeled to face the remaining bandits, now trembling with fear after seeing their leader slain. They backed away and, morale crumbling like a landslide, turned tail and fled for the smoldering hills of Qin Ridge.

The cheers that erupted from the Chen soldiers were so loud they shook the heavens.

The thunderous pounding of war drums sounded like battering rams at Tong Pass's gate. Atop the battlement, a row of straw figures had been lined up against the walls.

“Don’t worry. They’ll fall for the trap for certain,” Duan Ling assured Xie Hao, whose expression was strained.

A Tong Pass runner yelled down at the enemy forces below the wall: “Go back and tell your Grand Preceptor Helian our general is fine! You’ll get your money! Withdraw your troops!”

The Tangut army remained unmoved. A commander barked an order from the rear of their formation, and the soldiers raised their spears, sharp tips pointed at Tong Pass’s walls.

Duan Ling put his fingers to his lips and blew a sharp whistle. The runners lit their torches to send the signal, and within the walls, Chen soldiers set fire to the hay bales they had positioned in various spots around the city. Flames erupted in the distance, and after the fourth or fifth bale began to blaze, firelight painted the sky a crimson hue.

“Charge!” came the cry from within the walls.

The straw figures were set alight and pushed over the walls, accompanied by the exaggerated screams of Chen soldiers. Soon after, the drawbridge dropped, slamming across the ditch surrounding the city with a deafening crash.

Duan Ling and Xie Hao bounded down the stairs of the gate tower, nerves taut, bracing for the enemy to take the bait. As they reached the last step, they heard the earth-shaking blare of a bugle horn.

Upon hearing the cacophony of cries and the roaring of flames within the city, the Western Liang army was convinced the bandits had succeeded in taking the city from the inside. No longer hesitant or suspicious, they rushed the Tong Pass gate, battering the closed door. Chaos reigned as shouts filled the air.

“The city is breached!” someone yelled as the gate splintered.

“That’s my cue,” Xie Hao said.

“Be careful,” Duan Ling replied.

The duo went their separate ways at the bottom of the tower. Duan Ling hiked up another turret. He unshouldered the bow on his back, nocked an arrow, and lowered it to light the arrowhead in a brazier.

The Western Liang army was like a tiger setting upon a flock of sheep. The Tong Pass gate was easily breached; ten thousand soldiers poured in, swinging their blades with murderous intent. From his position atop the wall, Xie Hao led his men to fight off the invaders below. Duan Ling gazed out over the wall, counting the Tangut soldiers streaming through the gate.

Three, two, one… Almost half their number was inside now.

Duan Ling loosed the fiery arrow from his bow. It soared like a shooting star, its brilliant tip brightening the night sky as it arced toward the top of the gate tower. A bolt of lightning split the skies mid-flight, turning night to day as the arrow buried itself in the brazier hanging from the tower's highest eave. Flames roared to life.

At his signal, the remaining heavy iron gate of Tong Pass crashed down, cutting the invading army cleanly in two.

With a resounding cry, the Tong Pass infantry that had been lying in wait on the hills beyond the gates emerged. Taking advantage of their higher ground, they flung boulders and logs down onto the enemy, showering the clearing before the walls with a relentless bombardment. At the same time, Xie Hao led his men back up to the gate tower. In tandem with the catapulted projectiles outside, they released a rain of arrows down on the trapped Tangut troops inside the walls. Caught off guard, the Western Liang army descended into chaos.

It's done. Duan Ling blew out a breath of relief.

"Report!" A scout ran up and informed Duan Ling: "Lord Wu Du and General Wang have annihilated the bandit chief. The enemy is retreating southeastward!"

This was excellent news. Duan Ling observed the scene outside the walls. After the first round of catapult shot, the Chen cavalry had emerged and launched their assault. Meanwhile, within the walls, the city had become a ravaged battlefield as arrows continued to rain down. Victory was a foregone conclusion.

"I told you our general is fine!" Duan Ling shouted down at the Tangut army. "You didn't believe me! That'll show you!"

The Western Liang soldiers broke into curses, hurling insults at Duan Ling. Ignoring the abuse, Duan Ling loosed arrow after arrow from atop the wall, dropping enemy soldiers one by one. Although his skills couldn't compare to Li Jianhong's, he could at least manage to pick off the ones rushing the gate.

Lightning flashed across the horizon, flooding the earth with blinding light. In that split-second brightness Duan Ling spotted a silhouette scaling the wall, speedily making its way toward Xie Hao, who was barking orders at the archers.

Moving on instinct, Duan Ling shot an arrow toward Xie Hao's position. "General Xie! Watch out!"

Helan Jie scaled the wall in a single jump and leapt for Xie Hao, hook raised high. Before his blow could connect, he heard the faint whistle of an arrow slicing toward him. He twisted in midair to cut down the arrow instead.

Xie Hao jerked backward as his men rushed in with their swords and halberds. Helan Jie, forced back a few steps by one offending halberd, caught the haft and shoved it forward, flipping the wielder over the edge of the battlement. The soldier screamed as he plunged to his death.

Under the protection of his men, Xie Hao retreated. He needn't have worried—the second Helan Jie recovered his footing, he abandoned the deputy general. He whirled and vaulted up the wall, then bounded across the staggered roof tiles, racing up to the turret where Duan Ling stood.

"Run!" Xie Hao yelled at Duan Ling.

Duan Ling loosed another arrow. Helan Jie didn't bother to dodge, letting it strike his torso and clatter off. In a breath, he'd crossed the thirty feet of distance between them. Duan Ling got off three more arrows in rapid succession, but Helan Jie, protected by the Radiant White Tiger Armor, wasn't deterred in the least.

"You're dead!" Helan Jie bellowed, rushing through the last crenel to reach the top of the turret.

This was the moment Duan Ling had been waiting for. He aimed another fiery arrow at Helan Jie. But what threat did this weak boy pose to the assassin? Any attempt he made was a pointless struggle in the face of

certain death. Helan Jie charged Duan Ling, hook raised, rapidly closing the remaining gap.

He was inches away when Duan Ling released his fiery arrow. It struck Helan Jie squarely in the chest. Duan Ling sprang into a spinning kick, knocking the oil-filled brazier meant for lighting arrowheads toward the assassin.

Before he could register what was happening, the brazier crashed into him, spilling its boiling contents over his body. The heated oil burst into flame, setting Helan Jie's outer robe alight in an instant and turning him into a staggering fireball. He slipped on the burning grease and tumbled backward over the parapet.

Duan Ling rushed to the turret's edge and leapt over the low wall after him. He slid down the roof, dislodging tiles as he chased after Helan Jie—aflame and howling as he thrashed. At the sight of Duan Ling, he arrested his fall and dove toward his attacker, hook swinging. Duan Ling, caught by surprise, couldn't dodge in time—yet just as Helan Jie's hook threatened to impale him, a lithe figure came flying to his rescue.

Lang Junxia landed on the upsweep of the eave. He drew his sword as he spun, piercing Helan Jie's arm and pinning him to the roof with a *clang*.

Duan Ling was stunned speechless.

Lang Junxia executed another leap and landed behind Helan Jie, seizing the sword strapped to the assassin's back almost before his feet touched the tiles.

"I'll take the sword. You can take the Radiant White Tiger Armor," he told Duan Ling. "We shall meet again."

Lang Junxia yanked his blade from Helan Jie's arm and slashed down, cleaving his arm off at the shoulder before butchering both his legs in the same fashion. Then he vaulted backward and vanished, like a streak of lightning across the sky, into the darkness.

Helan Jie rolled down the roof tiles, clattering over the eaves before plunging over the edge and crashing to the battlements below.

Trying desperately to catch his breath, Duan Ling turned and crawled back to the turret, panting. He climbed over the crenel and hurried down the stairs. The battle cries were fading inside the walls of Tong Pass. The clouds rumbled with continuing thunder, and a torrential rain poured down at last, washing the earth clean. Water splashed over the grounds, dousing the fire blazing on Helan Jie. Blood streamed from his broken body and pooled with the rain beneath him.

"Who ordered you to kill the late emperor?" Duan Ling demanded, staring down at Helan Jie. Past hatreds and fresh grudges surged in his chest.

Helan Jie's only response was a pained moan.

"Speak!"

"You… You…"

Helan Jie struggled up and dragged himself toward Duan Ling with his final remaining limb, leaving a bloody trail over the ground. He gazed up into Duan Ling's face, scrutinizing him. Dripping with rainwater, Duan Ling met Helan Jie's eyes and held his gaze, undaunted. It was this look that finally made the cruel assassin recall the man he'd ambushed a year ago to the day.

"You are…Li Jianhong's…"

"My father died because of you," Duan Ling said flatly. "Now tell me. Who gave you the orders?"

Helan Jie's charred head was horrifying to behold, skin split and bloody and blotched with burnt hair. His lips parted, their movement almost too small to see. "It was…it was…"

As Duan Ling took a step closer to catch the words, the silver glint of a needle shot toward him.

Hooves pounded as Skychaser rushed to the base of the tower. Wu Du swung off the horse and knocked Duan Ling aside in the same movement, pinning him to the wet ground. His right hand swiped through the air where Duan Ling had been to seize all three needles Helan Jie had released, metal clinking as they hit the magnetic plate.

Duan Ling struggled out of Wu Du's hold and scrambled upright. The last of his strength spent, Helan Jie's charred head dropped heavily to the ground. Blood seeped from his cracked skin, streaming down his face into the spreading puddles.

A panting Wu Du, his armor splashed with blood, levered himself up to sit and slumped against the wall. Duan Ling flashed him a resigned smile. He hadn't gotten the answer he wanted, but at least he had avenged his father.

"What's with that smile?!" Wu Du snapped. "Have you lost your wits? What could you possibly have to say to that madman? Do you not care for your own life?!"

He raised a hand, and for a brief, tense moment, Duan Ling thought he would strike him—but instead, Wu Du's hand grasped the back of his head and pulled him close, enfolding Duan Ling in trembling arms. His whole body was shaking.

Wu Du let his legs splay wide. He'd twisted his right ankle during the pitched battle against the bandits, and his injured left hand was wrapped up like a steamed bun. Holding Duan Ling tightly, he stroked his head with his uninjured hand and gazed at his visage as their breaths mingled.

The wind picked up and billowed across the land, dispersing the heavy storm clouds. The overcast sky cleared, as if some god had drawn back a thick, gray curtain to reveal a brilliant river of stars that stretched into time eternal. Countless puddles on the ground reflected the shimmering lights above, each seeming to contain a universe of its own.

The sound of battle faded into silence. It was as if this immense, timeless place was all that existed in an infinite world, isolated from life and death, from the starry river above and the great earth below. That was where they were: beside this magnificent wall. The autumn breeze swept past, stirring ripples in the puddles. The reflected, shimmering stars fragmented with the water's disturbance, their light trembling around the pair embracing on the ground.

It was the seventh day of the seventh month.

Wu Du was absorbed in Duan Ling's eyes. But at that very moment, as he gazed into those depths, an image from long ago surfaced in his mind.

Shocked bafflement replaced his first wild impulse, and his brows scrunched in a furrow.

He placed his palm over Duan Ling's nose and lips. Duan Ling looked back at him in confusion, a match to the surprise that colored Wu Du's expression. Wu Du removed his hand, then brought it up again as he studied Duan Ling's eyes. Those confused eyes matched a pair he'd once seen on a child—a boy who had shown only half his face behind an apothecary's counter on a blizzarding night in Shangjing seven years ago.

"I've met you before," Wu Du said in disbelief. "Seven years ago, at the apothecary in Shangjing. What's going on?"

ARC 3
The East Wind Blows Again

In Epang's great hall,
silken sleeves of dancers twirl;
in Golden Valley Garden,
exquisite towers soar.
By Sui's Grand Canal,
the dragon boat old willows pull.
A past too bitter to recall—
The east wind blows again, and yet
At late spring's end, only wildflowers sprawl.

By the Wu River's shore,
a beauty took her life;
on Red Cliff's hills,
earth scorched by war and strife;
at Yumen Pass, an old general,
aged in vain.
Grieved by Qin and Han's cruel reign—
The people, slaughtered and burnt all,
And the scholar heaves a sigh of pain.

—"Flower Girl's Hawking: Reminiscing on the Ancients"
by Zhang Kejiu, Yuan Dynasty

Chapter 87

ON THE SEVENTH DAY of the seventh month, thirteen years after the signing of the Treaty of Shangzi, Southern Chen and Western Liang clashed in war once more. But the battle fought at Tong Pass on the night of Qixi ended in less than a day, over before the flashes of lightning faded from the night sky. The formal declaration of war hadn't even reached the courts of Liao, Yuan, or Chen itself before the Tangut army withdrew in defeat.

On the seventh day of the seventh month, in the Battle of Tong Pass, the number of casualties on Western Liang's side—both at Qin Ridge and the pass itself—numbered seventeen thousand, with thirteen thousand captured.

The day after the battle, Helian Da of Western Liang urgently recalled the soldiers disguised as bandits, gathered the survivors, and retreated thirty li from Tong Pass. The same night, Bian Lingbai passed away from his sudden illness—and the following day, a new governor from the imperial court arrived in Tong Pass. He assumed Bian Lingbai's command without incident and made his first priority reorganizing the army.

Zheng Li was a man with a snowy white beard nearing sixty years of age. When Duan Ling's grandfather had still lived, this man had once led Southern Chen's army in battle beyond the Great Wall. Asking him to come out of retirement to guard Tong Pass was the best possible choice.

"Prime Minister Mu told me before I departed the capital that you have a clear head on your shoulders," he said upon meeting Duan Ling. "He said you have an orderly mind and take everything into account in your considerations. I see now for myself that he was right. I am awed; the young are fearsome indeed."

"I'm undeserving of such praise," Duan Ling said humbly, sweating with nerves. "I've been ever so fortunate to have Mister Fei and Wu Du with me."

Duan Ling wasn't just being humble in front of Zheng Li. Though he'd been the one to plan the Battle of Tong Pass, the execution had been full of holes, and he'd nearly lost his life twice. Without Wu Du by his side, he would have been dead before he'd accomplished anything.

Zheng Li made several straightforward adjustments to the military order but left untouched the positions of the two deputy generals, Wang An and Xie Hao. Upon observing Zheng Li's arrangements for Xie Hao, Duan Ling realized there was no need for him to offer any recommendations on which officer might be of more use. Though his mission here at Tong Pass was complete, Duan Ling still had much to take care of when he got back. He packed his bags for Xichuan and bade Zheng Li farewell.

"I've met you before. Seven years ago, at the apothecary in Shangjing."

The night of Qixi, after the battle, Duan Ling had finally admitted the truth.

"Yes, that was me. You even used the golden crow to scare me."

"But you…" Wu Du's brow had creased as recollections of past events had flooded over him.

After the storm's passage, the autumn sky over Tong Pass was a hue so blue it looked as if it had been rinsed clean. The carriage rumbled southward, driven by the same mute driver who had conveyed them north. Wu Du and Duan Ling were the only souls inside.

Once they emerged from Qin Ridge and entered the area around Mount Ba, Duan Ling bade the driver to take a break by the side of the road. Rows of flaming-red maple trees lined the mountain path. Duan Ling assisted the hobbling Wu Du out of the carriage and settled him in the grove for a rest while he retrieved fresh water from a nearby stream to change Wu Du's dressing.

Wu Du sat on a large rock, his unshod right foot propped on a folding stepstool. His injured palm and sprained ankle were still healing. Sitting down beside him, Duan Ling mixed salve for Wu Du's wounds; he spread some on his ankle first to reduce the swelling, then unwound the bandage on his left hand and applied more to stop the bleeding and speed his healing.

“Your hand should heal within a month,” Duan Ling told him. “We only need to worry if it starts discharging pus. The ankle will take some time, though. A hundred days for injured bones and muscles, as they say. Be careful with it for the next little while.”

Wu Du stared fixedly at Duan Ling. “It’s fine.”

“Your qinggong is so good, it’d be a shame if your foot didn’t heal properly,” Duan Ling said firmly.

“What was it you wanted to say to me, before?” Wu Du asked, changing the subject. “Stop dawdling. There’s no one else here—so *now* can you tell me?”

Duan Ling smiled. “Back in the cave, you said you had something to tell me too. What was it?”

Since Qixi, the two hadn’t had much time to talk. First they’d been occupied by the withdrawal of the Tangut army, and then the slew of events that had followed. For the past two days, Wu Du had been racking his brain to no avail. He couldn’t figure out why Duan Ling would’ve been in an apothecary in Shangjing on that snowy night seven years ago.

Duan Ling had said before that his father had been an herb merchant—had he been the apothecary’s owner?

“Then let me ask you first,” Wu Du began. “What were you doing there? Aren’t you supposed to be from Xunbei?”

“It was fate, wasn’t it?” Duan Ling replied easily. “Our meeting has been destined since then.”

He gingerly dabbed the salve onto Wu Du’s wounded hand. Wu Du averted his gaze, awkward, peering instead at the maple trees sprawling over the hills. Red leaves drifted all around them, fluttering in the wind.

“Fate, huh?” Wu Du murmured. “I… I swore before the sect that, for the rest of my life, I would never marry, start a family, or build any sort of lasting enterprise.”

“Why?” Duan Ling asked.

“Assassins must all be like this,” Wu Du replied. “Once you have a lover, a family, you have a weakness. After you kill your enemy, their descendants will seek revenge—perhaps they’ll kill your family and burn

your house and everything in it to the ground. What future is there for someone who kills for a living?"

"But what about your shifu and shiniang? Weren't they married?"

"They never were—not officially," Wu Du said. "But in my mind, she will always be Shiniang. When Shifu died during the sack of Shangzi, Shiniang joined him in death, sacrificing herself in the name of love. The Radiant White Tiger Armor was lost then, and the Mountain and River Sword Manual fell into the hands of Zhao Kui, who arrived too late to save them."

"So you swore allegiance to Zhao Kui in order to find the armor and manual?" Duan Ling asked.

Wu Du nodded. "He knew I would leave him as soon as I did, which I presume was why he hid it."

"What were you planning to do after finding it—rebuild the sect?"

"The sect has already declined beyond saving. The heart of our original creed has long been lost, and the Guardian of the Realm, which commands us, is missing. The White Tiger Sect has only one other duty, and that is to protect the emperor in turbulent times…but the emperor has no need for my protection," he finished dejectedly. "The crown prince wishes to recruit me, but he is looking for an obedient killer, not a scion of the White Tiger Sect. In short, he doesn't need me either."

But I need you, Duan Ling thought. *I need you.*

"Whether it's Zhao Kui, Prime Minister Mu, or even the crown prince… Aside from the late emperor, what everyone seeks is a killing blade," Wu Du said. "But it can't be helped. Killing is what's needed in tumultuous times."

Duan Ling bit his tongue, as if stopping himself from speaking. Thinking he intended to comfort him, Wu Du patted him on the back. "Shan-er, what about you? What are *your* plans? I know you want to make a name for yourself. You're sixteen this year. Sticking with me will only hinder you."

"Wh-what?" Duan Ling was flustered by the sudden shift of focus onto himself, both amused and warmed by Wu Du's thoughtfulness.

“Like you said. Seven years ago, I went to Shangjing on a mission. It was fate that I met you then.” Wu Du paused. “Maybe heaven brought you back to me because our fate together hasn’t ended yet.”

Emotions filled Duan Ling upon hearing these words. Was this all the work of fate? Perhaps, since the day he was born, everything had been predestined: that he would be Li Jianhong’s son, the crown prince of Southern Chen, and that one day, providence would bring him to Shangjing, where he would inevitably meet Wu Du for the first time.

“I can’t start a family, but you’re different,” Wu Du said. “You can’t just follow me around for the rest of your life. Once we’re back, think it over. You just turned sixteen, you’ve a brilliant future ahead of y—”

“Of course I’ll follow you for the rest of my life.” Duan Ling wrapped the fresh bandage around Wu Du’s hand and secured it with a knot. “I don’t plan to start a family either—but building an enterprise is certainly possible.”

“If you…” Wu Du faltered. As if he’d expected Duan Ling to protest, he had a counter ready: “You’ll have no status if you stay with me, and what good would that do you? Would you be my servant boy forever? What happened to establishing yourself—didn’t you say you want to climb higher?”

“We’ll be like your shifu and shiniang,” Duan Ling said matter-of-factly.

Wu Du flushed crimson at that, and Duan Ling realized a second too late that what he’d just said sounded questionable.

Another maple leaf fluttered down, swishing softly as it alighted upon a pile of its fellows.

Eyes fixed on Duan Ling, Wu Du stammered, “Then… Why don’t we… Might as well…”

“Might as well what?” Duan Ling blinked.

Wu Du paused and thought for another moment. He flapped a hand. “Never mind. It’s nothing.”

Duan Ling was completely lost now.

“You’re just lucky I found you instead of Zheng Yan,” Wu Du said. “So I guess… That’s settled for now?”

“Zheng Yan? What’s Zheng Yan got to do with anything?” Duan Ling asked.

“Nothing.” Wu Du waved again. “Let’s get back on the road.”

“Wait.” Duan Ling tugged on Wu Du’s hand to stop him from rising. “I still have something I want to say.”

Wu Du looked at Duan Ling, puzzled.

Holding Wu Du’s hand, Duan Ling contemplated his words with care. He understood why Wu Du had said what he did. They’d never openly addressed the nature of their relationship; to outsiders, like Mu Kuangda, the boy who had shown up out of the blue was just the son of a friend whom Wu Du had taken under his wing. Yet both knew, deep down, that Duan Ling was only sheltering under his protection for the time being. Duan Ling could leave him at any time—hence Wu Du’s speech.

Hearing Duan Ling state his conviction to stay with him had obviously made Wu Du happy—the good intentions he’d shown Duan Ling had been recognized and returned.

“Losing my dad was the most painful thing that’s happened in my life,” Duan Ling started. Still gripping Wu Du’s hand, he sat down next to him on the rock. Wu Du interlaced their fingers and gave Duan Ling’s hand a comforting squeeze.

“I’ll take good care of you,” he declared stiffly, his expression so awkward as to look unnatural.

“Do you remember the day we first met?” Duan Ling asked him.

Wu Du chuckled. “Was your dad the doctor at Rongchang Hall? I remember you were holding ginseng meant to save a laboring woman’s life.”

“It was meant for Wuluohou Mu,” Duan Ling said. “You stabbed him, and he almost died.”

The laughter stuck in Wu Du’s throat, his smile vanishing in an instant. Stunned silent, he stared at Duan Ling in utter disbelief.

“Zhu was the first person I ever killed.” Duan Ling pressed ahead, ignoring Wu Du’s shock. “My dad ordered Wuluohou Mu to find me in Runan. After Wuluohou Mu collected me, he hid me in Shangjing. You led a team of Chen’s shadow squad to search for me day and night; you even went to my school after Zhu died to look for me. But you mistook Cai Yan for me that day and kidnapped him instead.

“So, I grew up in Shangjing. Then two years ago, in the spring, my dad came to find me. He taught me all those things you think I shouldn’t know, like battle strategy and qinggong… He trained me in archery, and even started teaching me the Mountain and River Sword Style.”

He slipped his hand out of Wu Du’s and rose to his feet.

Duan Ling focused, recalling the Mountain and River palm technique—and took a fluid, swishing step forward, stirring maple leaves into the air with his stride. Wu Du watched with wide eyes as Duan Ling moved freely in and out of the bloodred maples, striking this way and that until finally he withdrew his outflung palm and recentered his weight. He stretched his arms wide, drawing a circle up and pushing his palms down in a closing stance, completing the form from beginning to end.

“See? I got some parts wrong,” Duan Ling said, a little nervous. “But it’s mostly right.”

Wu Du gaped at him, unable to speak. Duan Ling sat back down beside him and gave his shoulder a shake. “Hey, Wu Du, are you listening?”

“A-and then?” Wu Du’s voice trembled. His mind was blank.

Duan Ling picked up Wu Du’s hand and intertwined his fingers with his own again.

“And then Shangjing fell. I waited for him, but my dad never came. I escaped the city with Cai Yan.”

This revelation finally seemed to register as Wu Du turned his eyes on Duan Ling in a daze.

“I don’t know what happened after that,” Duan Ling said in a faraway voice. “By the time I arrived in Xichuan, things were as they are now. I lost everything. I don’t know who’s impersonating me, but Lang Junxia… Wuluohou Mu poisoned me and threw me into the river. Maybe I floated down with the currents. You saved me.” Coming back to the present, he said, “I’m sorry, Wu Du. I lied to you about so many things. I was scared you were one of Prime Minister Mu’s men; I didn’t dare tell you…”

Wu Du pushed off the rock and stumbled to his feet. Duan Ling looked up, bewildered.

“So you are…” Wu Du stammered, voice quavering. “I knew it… I knew something was off. So *you’re* the real crown prince… You—you…”

Despite his injuries, Wu Du dropped to his knees in front of Duan Ling.

“Get up!” Duan Ling yelped.

“Your Highness,” Wu Du gasped, voice choked. “I’ve been useless. I couldn’t protect the late emperor…”

Duan Ling knelt down too. “Get up!”

“You get up…” Wu Du tried to lift Duan Ling back onto his feet.

“No, *you* get up!” Duan Ling exclaimed, almost frantic.

The absurdity struck them, and the pair stared at each other in bemusement. Abruptly, Wu Du reached out and yanked Duan Ling into a tight, near-desperate embrace. He was so overwhelmed he couldn’t speak; everything that had confounded him before now had an explanation.

“I don’t blame you,” Duan Ling said. “I really don’t. You were never at fault in the first place. If you still feel guilty, I grant you forgiveness on behalf of my deceased father. From now on, don’t let his death weigh you down.”

Wu Du’s arms tightened around him, his embrace so tight it was painful.

“Now get up, Wu Du.” Duan Ling pulled him to his feet. They locked eyes, gazing at each other in silence for a long time. Myriad feelings surged in their chests, yet neither could find the words to speak them aloud.

Chapter 88

"YOU SHOULDN'T have told me," Wu Du said at last with a frown.

"If I can't tell you, then there's no one I can trust in the whole world," Duan Ling replied. "Helian was my schoolmate, back in Shangjing, but not even he knows my true identity. I can't keep living like this." His brow was furrowed in sorrow, his voice thick with anguish. "Sometimes…I feel like I'm losing my mind."

"I get it," Wu Du said. "You—I'll definitely… Never mind. There's no use saying anything right now. Just keep your eyes on me."

"Huh?" Duan Ling looked up questioningly at Wu Du.

"No, I mean—we'll take this one step at a time. I'll prove it to you—I'll never betray you."

Duan Ling laughed. "I'm not worried about that."

He leaned in and wrapped his arms around Wu Du, nestling into his embrace. Wu Du fidgeted awkwardly, unsure what to do with his hands and blushing a deep red.

"Stop squirming," Duan Ling murmured. "Just let me hug you for a bit, okay?"

And so Wu Du simply stood, letting Duan Ling hold him.

Duan Ling felt—strange. He hadn't had this feeling in a long time. He'd become used to snuggling up to Wu Du as he went

to sleep, but this embrace was different. He'd finally spilled all the words that had been lodged in his chest; he'd finally found someone with whom to share his burden.

Wu Du, dazed, returned his embrace without thinking, wrapping his arms around Duan Ling's shoulders.

Before, when they'd held each other, Duan Ling had always felt uncertain, like his heart was suspended in midair. Now that lingering unease

had been dispelled. This time—and perhaps every time going forward—he felt grounded, at peace, as if he'd at long last found a place where his heart could rest.

Wu Du remained stunned. As they stood washed in the light of the setting sun, maple leaves dancing around them, everything seemed dreamlike. He glanced down at Duan Ling, whose eyes were closed, lashes gilded with the last light of day. Suddenly, everything had changed.

"What's your real name?" Wu Du asked softly.

"Li Ruo." Duan Ling raised his head to meet Wu Du's gaze. "'In the far east stands Fusang; in the far west stands Ruomu.' But if no one else is around, call me Duan Ling. I don't want to forget that name."

Duan Ling nervously watched Wu Du's face for his reaction. He still looked stupefied, like he couldn't believe it. Duan Ling thought Wu Du's question meant he had accepted the truth—but after this short exchange, he realized Wu Du had spoken entirely out of reflex. His mind was still a whirl.

"Swear… Swear to me you're not just playing around," Wu Du said. "Wang Shan, you—"

"Why would I do that?!" Duan Ling exclaimed, exasperated now. "Joke at the risk of my own life? What good would pretending to be the crown prince do? I'm not looking to die, gosh."

Wu Du silently agreed with that sentiment. Now, though, his mind was an even greater storm of conflicting emotions, flooded with a million thoughts: The young man he'd spent day and night with was abruptly a stranger; he'd finally repaid the debt he owed the Li family; and to top it all off, the crown prince sitting in the court was a fraud. The more he considered these revelations, the further his shock compounded until he was rendered wordless once more.

"Whether or not I'm the crown prince, I'm still me," Duan Ling asserted with real seriousness. "Wu Du?"

Wu Du's gaze had gone distant again. His obvious befuddlement broke Duan Ling from his solemn mood, and he couldn't help but snicker in amusement. He nudged Wu Du. "Hey. Anybody home?"

Every time Wu Du fell into a stupor, he was pulled back to reality by Duan Ling. Snapping out of his reverie, Wu Du turned to look at the boy beside him with still-dazed eyes.

“Come on, let’s get back on the road,” Duan Ling prompted. “The sun’ll set soon.”

Duan Ling shifted his weight so Wu Du could lean on him to stand, but Wu Du declined with haste. “This… This subject can walk by himself.”

“Stop it,” Duan Ling said, irked. He grabbed Wu Du’s arm and pulled it around his own shoulders, then helped him hobble at a slow, steady pace down the hill.

The maple grove shimmered like a rustling sea of burnished light under the westering sun as they made their way toward the carriage. Wu Du’s world had just been toppled; Duan Ling expected he would need some time to sort his thoughts. Now wasn’t the moment to push him, or his confusion would only increase; he’d end up completely at a loss for what to do with himself.

Before he climbed into the carriage, Duan Ling patted Skychaser and nuzzled against his arched neck. Skychaser huffed and leaned into Duan Ling’s touch, turning his head to gaze at him.

Brought up short again, Wu Du stared hard at Skychaser; abruptly, everything made sense.

“He knows me,” Duan Ling said in a quiet voice. “See?”

Duan Ling walked a few steps away and whistled at Skychaser, just as his father used to do. Skychaser trotted to meet him. Duan Ling jogged farther away, and Skychaser followed, displaying none of the violent temper he was known for. Duan Ling grabbed Skychaser’s saddle and swung up, seating himself easily astride the horse’s back.

“Now let’s go,” Duan Ling prompted again after this demonstration. “If we don’t hurry, we’ll have to camp tonight.”

Once they returned to the carriage and climbed back inside, Wu Du didn’t dare sit with him as they’d done before; Duan Ling had to yank him down beside him. Everything seemed to be moving as it always did, yet something had undeniably changed.

Wu Du's prolonged silence was beginning to make Duan Ling nervous. He wasn't sure how Wu Du would react when he came back to his senses. With trepidation, he said, "I'm going to nap for a bit. Wake me when we get there?"

"Yes, sir," Wu Du responded.

Their eyes met. Wu Du twisted away immediately.

It wasn't hard for Duan Ling to sense his extreme unease. Wu Du was still mired in shock over Duan Ling's true identity. Thinking to help the situation along, Duan Ling first lay down on Wu Du's thighs—then, considering that maybe if he was physically closer, the familiarity would alleviate some of Wu Du's discomfort, he sat back up and leaned instead against his chest.

Wu Du stiffened instantly. "Your Highness!"

"Shh." Duan Ling knew the old driver was supposed to be both deaf and mute, but what if he was only acting?

He reclined against Wu Du the same way he used to lie on Li Jianhong, and tucked an arm around Wu Du's waist. Treating Wu Du as a giant pillow, he laid his head to rest on his sturdy chest and crept the other up to rest on his shoulder. He wasn't actually tired. But he knew Wu Du needed time, so he closed his eyes and pretended to fall into a sound sleep. The solitude, at least, would give Wu Du a chance to think. Save for the clacking of rolling wheels and the snap of the horse whip every now and then, it was a quiet journey.

After a long interval, Wu Du stirred under his weight. Moving with utmost caution, as if worried he would wake Duan Ling, he caught the hand Duan Ling had draped on his shoulder and placed it onto his chest. Then, he gingerly tugged the outer robe over to cover them both, tucking Duan Ling's hand beneath the makeshift blanket.

As night fell, a sickle moon climbed the sky, casting its brilliant glow over the hills and rivers. The river waters sparkled with fleeting fragments of silvery light like a million brilliant dreams. Duan Ling was only faking slumber, but after a while spent listening to Wu Du's steady breathing beneath his ear, he realized Wu Du had actually fallen asleep.

In Wu Du’s dream, the carriage stopped at the center of a magnificent bridge, its driver nowhere to be found. Silvery, delicate moonlight enveloped them in a gentle embrace as Duan Ling, the only other soul in his world, lay in Wu Du’s arms. Even in his dreams, Wu Du was still dazed by what he’d learned.

After a moment, someone else climbed into the carriage.

“My son is asleep, is he?” he asked Wu Du.

“Yes,” Wu Du answered with great earnestness.

“I’ll leave him in your hands,” Li Jianhong said. “Take good care of him.”

“Wu Du?” Another voice broke through.

Duan Ling was shaking him awake. The carriage had already stopped for the night. They were taking their return journey at a much more leisurely pace than when they’d first departed Xichuan, and so their first night was to be spent lodged near a river beside the intersection of the Tong Pass and the capital-bound highways, just outside the foothills of Qin Ridge, where a small inn was located.

When Wu Du woke, he seemed to have forgotten the earth-shattering revelation he’d learned before going to sleep. He yawned groggily and said, “I had a strange dream.”

His arm had fallen asleep from Duan Ling lying on it, and he patted him, shooing him off.

Relieved Wu Du had returned to normal, Duan Ling began collecting their things to disembark. “What did you dream?”

“I dreamed of the late emperor—” Wu Du stopped. Now that he was fully awake, reality came flooding back. An awkward silence filled the carriage.

“So… You dreamed about my dad?” Duan Ling ventured.

“He told me to take good care of you.”

Wu Du was struck once more by the realization that the young man before him was none other than the true crown prince of Southern Chen. Although Duan Ling’s identity was unrecognized by the court—and, worse,

had been actively usurped by an impostor—he remained the sole descendant and heir of the royal Li family.

The pair entered the inn and requested a single room as they'd always done, except now Wu Du panicked whenever Duan Ling attended him. Several times he tried to stand up and intervene, only to be firmly pressed back down into his seat. Duan Ling led Skychaser around to the stables, then instructed the inn's servants that their dinner should be served in their room. The two sat on opposite sides of a small table to eat their meal.

Wu Du held his chopsticks in his right hand, but with his left hand bandaged, he couldn't hold his bowl.

"Shall I feed you?" Duan Ling asked.

"No, I can eat by myself." Wu Du declined instantaneously.

Duan Ling ignored his protests and fed him a bite with his own chopsticks. Wide-eyed, Wu Du was at once flustered and helpless.

"You and I…" Duan Ling stopped. After a thoughtful pause, he said, "Mm… Let's keep things the way they were. Wu Du, you said I'm heartless. But I really don't have a choice in the matter."

In that moment, understanding dawned on Wu Du. How heavy was the burden Duan Ling carried—and how great a risk had he taken in order to trust him? If anyone else should discover the truth, his life would be in immediate danger.

"I'll keep you safe," Wu Du vowed. "You'll never be in danger again—I won't let anyone hurt you."

Duan Ling felt his heart twinge. He already knew Wu Du wouldn't betray him, but all the same, he hadn't expected Wu Du to be so staunchly resolute in his loyalty.

Silence blanketed the room.

At last, unable to eat any more, Wu Du set down his chopsticks. "So what's the plan?"

"The plan, huh?" Duan Ling thought for a second. "Up to you. What I said before remains unchanged. If you don't plan to marry, in the future, we—"

“I meant—how do you plan to take your rightful place in court,” Wu Du clarified, his tone serious.

“Have you met the current crown prince?” Duan Ling asked. “I have nothing that can prove my identity. I mostly resemble my mom, not so much my dad. How did the fake crown prince even convince anyone with his appearance…?”

“He’s that kid—the one from the Cai family,” Wu Du replied. Over his entire life, the only question that had continued to plague him—for more than seven years—was Wuluohou Mu’s reaction that day at the school, when he’d lunged at the unconscious Cai Yan with his sword. At last, here and now, he received the answer to this mystery from Duan Ling himself.

And just like that, another puzzle piece slotted into place.

“It’s Cai Yan? I knew it,” Duan Ling said.

Melancholy welled up in him. He’d harbored a faint suspicion about Cai Yan, somewhere in the back of his mind, if only because there had been no news of his friend since their escape from Shangjing. Cai Yan should’ve escaped from the herb village in the Xianbei Mountains on that terrible day—only Duan Ling had been caught. Perhaps Lang Junxia had searched for Duan Ling—and failing to find him, brought a fraudulent crown prince back to the imperial court. Who else but Cai Yan, who had seen his father and learned pieces of the Mountain and River Sword Style, would be able to impersonate him so successfully?

“But he doesn’t look anything like my dad,” Duan Ling mused.

Wu Du’s frown deepened. “You’ll understand when you see him. Wuluohou Mu must’ve used herbs and a little knife to sculpt his face. His eyebrows, the folds of his eyes, and the line of his lips do now somewhat resemble the late emperor’s.” He scrutinized Duan Ling, eyes tracing over every line of his face without missing a single detail. “You’re much better looking than him.”

The compliment didn’t properly register with Duan Ling; he nodded out of reflex. He was irritated, mind occupied with thoughts of Cai Yan.

“I wonder if the fourth prince”—Wu Du corrected himself—“I mean, His Majesty, would recognize you?”

“Hard to say. Shall we take a gamble? Could you take me to him?”

Wu Du nodded. “It’s not hard to seek an audience with him, but you’ll need to think on how to make him believe you. When that impostor returned to court, the fourth prince called each of us to examine him. I remembered having seen him at Ming Academy, so I gave my approval.”

Having said it aloud, Wu Du was consumed by guilt. In a burst of frustration, he slammed his injured fist down on the table, brows tightly knit.

Duan Ling leapt to console him. “It’s not your fault! How could you have known anyone would pretend to be me?” Still worried he’d have another attack of conscience, he continued: “Let’s just take our time and plan carefully, okay?”

Wu Du nodded. He pushed himself up to tidy the table, but Duan Ling shooed him off to bed instead. “Let me. You’re wounded.”

As Duan Ling cleaned, Wu Du’s eyes tracked him from one side of the room to the other. Duan Ling must have known he was still having a hard time processing everything. Truth be told, he’d surprised himself with how readily he’d accepted Duan Ling’s words. Though he had only served Li Jianhong for a few short days, and though he was now scrutinizing Duan Ling to the best of his ability as if to discern his trustworthiness, he didn’t really harbor any doubt that Duan Ling had spoken the truth. His gut feeling on the matter was the most honest of all.

After Duan Ling had everything back in order, he crawled into bed beside Wu Du as usual, cheerfully pulling the cover up over them both. In contrast, Wu Du felt like a frightened bird. He stared at Duan Ling, considering whether he should haul his ass down to sleep on the floor. Yet before he could move, Duan Ling grabbed his arm and rested his head on it —just as he’d always done.

I feel so light now that I dumped this burden on Wu Du, Duan Ling thought. *Now I can finally, really sleep.* Aloud, he murmured, “You know what?”

Wu Du was stumped again, at a loss for how to answer Duan Ling. *Yessir* sounded too formal, but a simple *Hm?* was too flippant. He hadn’t figured out what his current position was: the rightful crown prince’s

personal guard, or a subject of the crown to whom the late emperor had entrusted his orphaned son.

Duan Ling carried on speaking with a smile, seemingly unaware of Wu Du's deep internal dilemma. "Since my dad passed away last year, I've never felt as happy as I did today. I feel alive again."

He laughed, and the sound reminded Wu Du of the early spring day he'd first arrived in Jiang Prefectural City. The city had been adrift with peach blossoms dancing in a gentle breeze—one that seemed to welcome him with open arms. The curtains to that magnificent world had seemed to rise for him alone.

Moved, Wu Du suddenly wanted to give Duan Ling the best of everything in the world. But he had nothing.

"I… My hand is hurt," he said. After a pause, he continued with a touch of nervousness, "Otherwise I'd play you a song."

"Mm," Duan Ling hummed, closing his eyes. His head was comfortably pillowed on Wu Du's shoulder, and he murmured a response before sleep claimed him. "Maybe later. We've got plenty of time ahead of us. I'm done for tonight. So sleepy."

And so it was that, with a smile hanging off his lips, Duan Ling drifted into a dreaming slumber.

Chapter 89

"YOUR HIGHNESS," Zheng Yan said as he sauntered into the crown prince's study. "It's late. We depart tomorrow. Freshen up and go to bed soon."

Cai Yan shot him a sharp look over his desk piled high with memorials and replied, with meticulous courtesy, "You may retire first, Zheng-qing."

"Still waiting, huh. For that guy?"

Blunt as always. Zheng Yan, it seemed, never missed an opportunity to needle him. Not for the first time, Cai Yan considered ordering Wu Du to poison this man.

"Who do you mean, I wonder?" Cai Yan asked with a smile. "I'm not waiting for anyone. Could there be someone Zheng-qing is waiting for?"

"Ohh… So you're waiting for a dead body, then?" Zheng Yan said.

Cai Yan's smile dropped from his face, replaced by a stormy glare. Zheng Yan grinned.

"I'll go see your fourth uncle and have a cup or two with him," Zheng Yan said breezily. "You comin', Your Highness? The body probably won't be hauled back here any time soon."

Gritting his teeth, Cai Yan replied stiffly, "You do jest, Zheng-qing."

"Amnesty will be granted within the realm tomorrow." Zheng Yan picked up a cup and gave it a testing wobble. "I hear a bunch of petty bastards will be released from the imperial prison. How benevolent of you, Your Highness."

Cai Yan stiffened further, but he replied with a dismissive edge, "Their crimes do not warrant death, and we are lacking capable men at the moment. Unless Zheng-qing has something to share about Feng?"

Grinning broadly, Zheng Yan looked Cai Yan up and down. "You're not much like your dad."

Cai Yan’s expression twisted into a scowl. This man truly needed to die.

“Life’s short and miserable,” Zheng Yan continued, unruffled. “Enjoy the moment, eh?”

“Zheng-qing.” Cai Yan’s voice trembled, as if he was suppressing a burning rage. “Please retire to your quarters. The death anniversary ceremony is over. Do not continue to provoke me. It’s tiresome.”

Zheng Yan ignored him and sat down on the steps below the low dais on which his desk was placed. Back to Cai Yan, he mumbled absently, “Life is but a giant bowl of ink. You become stained with the colors of whomever you rub up against.”

“What is it you’re trying to say, Zheng-qing?” Cai Yan demanded. “Are you telling me to be wary of Feng?”

“Feng’s wits are sharp enough, but all his schemes are just underhanded tricks and conspiracies—nothing honest. He’s not worth any special attention. I just remembered the late emperor, that’s all.”

He stood up and turned, flashing Cai Yan a smile. “The world is a colorful place. Stay in any position long enough, and you’ll be imbued with its color. The sole exception was the late emperor, who was a shade of his own. Whether it be black or white, the late emperor, wielding Guardian of the Realm, never swayed to either side. After a while following him, those other colors seemed to fade away to blankness, and life regained its original simplicity. More or less, it felt like a glimpse into the real will of heaven. I hope you’ll remember that, Your Highness.”

Cai Yan froze, shaken by these words. Zheng Yan bowed, composed and suddenly much more sober. He sauntered away with a flick of his sleeves, leaving Cai Yan sitting alone in a daze.

Autumn wind wended through the palace grounds, stirring leaves and scattering them across the gardens. Only a handful of attendants remained in the palace halls, and they bustled about preparing for the next day’s departure.

Li Yanqiu sat in the imperial study and stared vacantly at the garden outside. The empress Mu Jinzhi had already departed with the Mu family's retinue for the new capital in Jiang Prefectural City, and such a vast palace, now hollowed, felt hauntingly desolate. The bowl of medicine on the table in front of him had long gone cold.

Zheng Yan strolled through the corridors to the study looking half asleep. When he entered, he plopped down easily beside Li Yanqiu and raised his flask in a toast. "Now, we drink! I'll have my booze and you have your medicine."

Li Yanqiu picked up his bowl and clinked it with Zheng Yan's flask. "Did you just come from the Eastern Palace?"

"Your Majesty's darling boy is still toiling away on those memorials in his rooms." Zheng Yan reclined on the emperor's divan. "That behavior resembles you, honestly. Not so much the late emperor."

The Li family had founded the nation on military might, a legacy that continued to be passed down through the generations. Even as monarchs, they were quite lax around etiquette. Like his ancestors, Li Yanqiu tended to treat his subjects with a casual attitude. Zheng Yan, however, was also special. More than a subject, he was an old friend.

"He doesn't have my brother's temperament," Li Yanqiu lamented, sighing, and shook his head. "He has a good heart, though. I imagine that must come from my sister-in-law."

Zheng Yan gazed out at the clear sky, contemplative.

"When I napped earlier, I dreamed of my brother," Li Yanqiu said. "Of course he would show up now instead of during the ceremony."

Zheng Yan took a nonchalant swig and offered no comment.

"I dreamed he was on a bridge," Li Yanqiu continued. "The far side of that bridge was no longer in the mortal realm, and below it was naught but moonlight. He said: 'My son has returned. It's time to move the capital. Another year has passed.'"

Zheng Yan finally spoke. "Maybe Your Majesty should reconsider the matter of granting amnesty to the realm? Releasing Feng may bring nothing but chaos. I wouldn't be so worried if the late emperor was still

around, but the master of the Eastern Palace—the crown prince—is the future sovereign. Your Majesty, no matter how desperately the Eastern Palace wants capable men…"

"The decree has already been issued," Li Yanqiu said with another sigh. "A ruler's words are not to be taken lightly—how can the order be rescinded? Besides, it was Rong-er who specially requested Feng's release. I'm sure you understand the pros and cons of this decision. Feng served as the commander for the shadow squad for many years; although it was my father who sentenced him to death, he remains loyal to our Great Chen."

Zheng Yan shook his head and let out his own sigh in response.

"But—you're right. The Eastern Palace has no wise advisors, an unacceptable situation. Through the half year since Rong-er's return, he's been under Wuluohou Mu's protection, and I was overwhelmed by court affairs. It has slipped my attention. After the capital's relocation is complete, I'll have to have him make proper arrangements."

"Excuse this subject for being blunt," Zheng Yan said with an air of carelessness, taking another sip from his flask, "but the current Eastern Palace is missing more than an advisor."

"It is missing a certain energy," Li Yanqiu agreed. "Rong-er is a diamond in the rough. He knows his duties, sitting where he does; he excels at assisting us in processing the memorials to the throne and assessing the welfare of the realm. Yet he holds himself back. He still hasn't come to realize one central fact—that this empire is his enterprise to shape."

Li Yanqiu lifted his medicine bowl anew. He gazed at his own visage reflected in the jet-black decoction, as if someone else—someone familiar—was staring back at him. "Or I should say: He still doesn't see himself as part of the Li family. He manages political affairs and presides over the court as a help to us, not for his own sake. Though on the other hand, I suppose it's also never a good idea to show off too much of one's ability."

He tossed back the medicine, his brow creasing slightly at the bitterness. "Zheng Yan, make the arrangements for me. The crown prince needs study companions and personal attendants. Recruit them under the title of guest advisors."

The sound of footsteps rushing toward them put an end to their conversation. A guard reported from the other side of the door, “The crown prince requests an audience.”

A slight frown crossed Li Yanqiu’s face. He and Zheng Yan gazed toward the corridor as Cai Yan emerged from around the corner, smiling broadly. Once he entered the study, he bowed toward Lan Yanqiu. Another man soon stepped in behind him—the travel-worn Lang Junxia.

“Wuluohou Mu?” Li Yanqiu knitted his brows. “You left without a word. I’ve yet to punish you for absence without official leave. Where did you run off to?”

“Uncle, never mind that,” Cai Yan said, sitting down beside Li Yanqiu. “Take a look at what he brought back.”

Lang Junxia glanced at Zheng Yan. Though they’d never met, they knew one another by reputation.

“You’re here,” Lang Junxia said.

Zheng Yan flashed a mirthless grin. “I am.”

Lang Junxia unstrapped the longsword he’d carried on his back and laid it across the imperial desk, respectfully presenting it with both hands. The scabbard was intricately carved with the image of Mahasthamaprapta—the bodhisattva of wisdom—vanquishing evil, a white tiger crouched beneath him. The hilt was encrusted with giant clam pearls and set with a single, pearlescent relic of the Buddha.

“I am fortunate not to have failed in my mission,” Lang Junxia said.

With that, he retreated from the room and stood outside the door to await any further command.

Li Yanqiu gripped the hilt and drew the sword from the scabbard. The blade slid free with a low, resonant hum. This was an ancient weapon, its surface freckled with old blood. Etched upon its blade were the words *Ender of the Profane*.

The morning sun was brilliant, the breeze gentle, and in the tiered fields across from the inn, farmers were reaping their crops. Duan Ling stood outside the entrance of their riverside lodge and stretched. Feeling

refreshed, he asked the waiter for a bucket and drew some water to boil for Wu Du's tea and dressing change.

He'd gotten the best sleep he'd had in a year the night before, while Wu Du hadn't managed to sleep a wink. He'd tossed and turned all night, only dozing when the sky lightened—but hadn't slept for long before he bolted back upright at the sound of water boiling. Exhausted, he put a hand over his face. Irritation pounded in his head.

"What time is it?" he asked out of reflex, then realized straightaway his tone was wrong. What subject of the crown would rudely ask the crown prince for the time? *He* should've been the one who woke up early to serve his sovereign, yet here they were.

"Morning," Duan Ling answered. "Are you all right? Not feeling well?"

Wu Du stared at him with bloodshot eyes. "Let me take care of the sundries from now on. Even if… Even if you weren't the crown prince, I should still be the one to take care of you. I've felt this way ever since we left Tong Pass together. Besides, you haven't exactly lived well since you've been with me…"

Duan Ling understood this to mean Wu Du had sorted out some of his complicated thoughts. "What does it matter who takes care of who? Would you say the same thing to Cai Yan before you knew he was an impostor?"

"Of course not. He isn't you," Wu Du said.

Duan Ling had dumped a load off his chest onto Wu Du the day before; reflecting back on that, he felt a twinge of embarrassment. But with a grin, he asked, "Then what if…what if the one Wuluohou Mu brought back to court had been me? Would you still feel the same way if we'd met under those circumstances?"

That possibility had never crossed Wu Du's mind, and it tangled his thoughts into a knot. If Duan Ling hadn't come to him as Wang Shan—if they hadn't spent so much time alone together—Wu Du's cold and indifferent temperament would have surely prevented him from opening up the same way. At most, he might've felt a pang of sympathy for Duan Ling and treated him with a touch more familiarity than normal. But even that

would have been under the assumption Wu Du believed the crown prince was being genuine with him.

Wu Du ruminated on it for another minute and had to admit Duan Ling was right. “Fine,” he grumbled, and let the matter go. The two locked eyes and broke into a shared chuckle.

“I was up all night thinking about your situation,” Wu Du admitted.

Duan Ling hummed as he unwound the bandage on Wu Du’s hand to reapply the salve.

“There’s someone I can bring you to,” Wu Du said. “His name is Xie You. If he recognizes your identity, he’ll risk his life to keep you safe.”

“I know of him,” Duan Ling replied. “He’s loyally sworn to the Son of Heaven, right? But the current Son of Heaven is my fourth uncle.”

Wu Du frowned slightly.

“And as long as my fourth uncle acknowledges me,” Duan Ling said, “Cai Yan will pose no threat whatsoever.”

Wu Du nodded. “One more thing: It’s too dangerous for you to step forward right now. I’ve long suspected Prime Minister Mu plans on taking down that faker and His Majesty. The poison from before—he never said who it was intended for, but it just might be the imposter.”

Duan Ling tied the final knot on Wu Du’s dressing, and Wu Du shifted and swung his legs over the edge of the bed. Duan Ling didn’t bat an eye as he bent down to slip on Wu Du’s boots, moving with practiced ease under Wu Du’s gaze. Once the boots were on, he tugged Wu Du’s arm around his shoulder and helped him stand.

It was a clear autumn day outside with a refreshing snap to the air. Crouching by the river to wash his face, Duan Ling returned to the subject again. “The worst-case scenario is Fourth Uncle refusing to believe I am who I say and locking me up. We don’t have any real proof. It’d be game over then.”

“Indeed,” Wu Du agreed. Now that he thought about it, that plan was fraught with risks and relied too heavily on luck.

“In the best-case scenario, Fourth Uncle acknowledges me and executes Wuluohou Mu and Cai Yan. But what comes after that?”

What he would face after that was nothing less than the turbulent maelstrom of court politics. There was a high likelihood Mu Kuangda would try to poison him. Of course, with Wu Du around, poison wasn't something Duan Ling feared—but then, what else would Mu Kuangda try?

"I need to tell you something," Wu Du said seriously. "Once you know about it, you mustn't ever let slip that you know in front of Prime Minister Mu, or it could get us both killed. Not that he's a threat to you, but…"

Duan Ling blinked at him.

"But if it does get out that you know, they'll come after your life," Wu Du finished. "And at that point we'll have no choice but to risk poisoning them all."

"Um… Tell me what it is first," Duan Ling said.

Chapter 90

“IT’S SOMETHING I accidentally overheard,” Wu Du began—then paused, finding their current location too exposed. From the corner of his eye, he noticed a small boat moored on the riverbank

and pointed. “Hop on. We’ll talk in the middle of the river.”

They boarded the vessel. Since Duan Ling didn’t know how to sail, Wu Du carefully steadied himself, picked up the pole, and pushed off from the dock. The small boat sliced through the water like an arrowhead under Wu Du’s poling, racing to the center of the river where it drifted to a stop.

Free from the risk of listening ears, Wu Du sat and beckoned Duan Ling closer. Wu Du draped an arm around Duan Ling, and the pair huddled together at the bow of the boat.

“The night I found out, I was searching for something in the prime minister’s residence,” Wu Du said.

“What were you looking for?” Duan Ling asked.

Wu Du peeled back Duan Ling’s outer robe to reveal the Radiant White Tiger Armor underneath. He gazed at Duan Ling pointedly, a silent answer, and Duan Ling nodded his understanding.

After the battle, Wu Du had stripped the chainmail from Helan Jie’s corpse and, disgusted, soaked it in an herbal concoction for days. He’d left it there until he was absolutely certain the armor was clean before he bestowed it upon Duan Ling, who had been wearing

it ever since. There hadn’t been any discussion of returning the armor to Wu Du—if Duan Ling was the rightful crown prince, such talk was entirely unnecessary.

“I was hiding up in the rafters and by chance caught part of a conversation between Chang Pin and Mu Kuangda,” Wu Du continued. “It sounded highly suspicious. Chang Pin said: ‘The timing of her belly swelling must be well-calculated. There can be no mistake.’”

Duan Ling was puzzled.

“Belly swelling?” he muttered. “Does he mean a pregnancy? Who’s pregnant?”

“Prime Minister Mu just hummed and they moved on to a different topic,” Wu Du said. “But I suspect Chang Pin was referring to the empress. If Mu Jinzhi were to give birth to a son, Prime Minister Mu would become the imperial uncle. And once His Majesty is… Well, in the future, it would be only natural for the prime minister to take control of the government.” Wu Du paused. “Prime Minister Mu can’t be happy with the crown prince’s return to court. An heir to the throne is his enemy; anyone who occupies that seat will invite danger.”

Li Yanqiu’s future son would be Mu Kuangda’s nephew. If Wu Du’s theory proved true, then Mu Kuangda’s attacks on Li Jianhong in the past made sense—and Lang Junxia bringing Cai Yan back must’ve completely upset his game board. However, given Mu Kuangda’s formidable intellect, Duan Ling doubted his plans were so simple.

“I wonder what they were discussing before Chang Pin said that,” Duan Ling mused. “Mu Jinzhi is his sister, not his wife. It’s not as if she’s some rare treasure he can use to turn the Li clan’s Great Chen into the Mu family’s…can he?”

Duan Ling was pondering, staring at the flowing river in the early morning light, when a shocking thought surged into his head. Abruptly, Duan Ling sensed that he’d glimpsed a small corner of the grander conspiracy Mu Kuangda had concocted—a glimpse that could be fatal to the entire Mu clan. If it was as he thought, the information Wu Du had revealed was equivalent to leveling the entire battlefield with a single blow.

Thoughts of Mu Kuangda’s scheme consumed Duan Ling for the rest of their trip back to the carriage. Wu Du was dead tired and passed out almost as soon as they took their seats. Now that his initial shock had passed, when he woke up again later, things between the pair had largely returned to normal.

Still hazy from his nap, Wu Du gazed openly at Duan Ling. With the issue of his identity out in the open, Duan Ling was no longer so self-conscious under his gaze. He pointed toward the window, gesturing for Wu Du to look outside. The journey from the Min River to Jiang Prefecture was breathtakingly scenic, with flaming maples blanketing the hills.

Upon reaching the Xichuan pier, the carriage rolled onto a large ferryboat, and they continued onward via the Yangtze River. Overhead, giant flocks of geese winged southward. The terror that had seized Duan Ling half a year ago, when he'd first passed through Jiang Prefectural City, had gradually faded from his mind—and as they journeyed on together, Wu Du's head grew ever clearer.

"We can't just rashly go and see your fourth uncle," Wu Du decided. "The consequences if we fail are too great."

Duan Ling nodded. After all, he was in the shadows while Cai Yan was in the light. The situation was still perilous, but winning Wu Du to his side was like winning a seat at the gambling table—he could properly join the fight. Though the future remained obscure, at least he was moving forward now.

"We'll keep hiding in the prime minister's residence," Wu Du continued. "As long as we plan every step carefully, Wuluohou Mu won't be able to touch you, much less make a reckless attempt on your life. And you see, he hasn't even tried since he saw you were still alive that night."

Lang Junxia was certainly the biggest of Duan Ling's worries. He didn't know if Lang Junxia had returned to Xichuan already—but if he had, and if he'd told Cai Yan the truth about Duan Ling, there would be serious trouble.

"Why do you think he hasn't?" Duan Ling asked.

"He doesn't want to draw Prime Minister Mu's attention," Wu Du hazarded. "There's no way Mu Kuangda wouldn't question why Wuluohou Mu murdered a guest in his home for no apparent reason. His mind is sharp; he would get to the bottom of it, guaranteed."

Duan Ling agreed with that reasoning. Even if Cai Yan discovered Duan Ling was with Wu Du, he wouldn't risk sending Lang Junxia to assassinate him. If Lang Junxia failed, it would inevitably arouse Mu Kuangda's suspicions—and Li Yanqiu's. After all, what reason did a crown prince have to kill an unremarkable commoner with whom he shared no connection or grudge?

Cai Yan and Lang Junxia would need to be absolutely certain they could make Duan Ling disappear from the world, without any chance of

failure, before they made a move.

The mountains loom far, the rivers stretch long.

Autumn nears its end, yet grass in Jiangnan lingers strong.[1]

Jiang Prefectural City had long been renowned as the finest city in the realm. Once called Jiangling, it flourished with the auspicious energy of emperors past. Since antiquity, whenever their northern enemies had breached the frontiers, Chen's emperors had unfailingly relocated the capital to this sanctuary. The city served as a hub between southern Jiangnan and the more northern Central Plains, as well as a gateway to Xichuan in the west. Nestled against the base of Mount Yuheng and facing the mighty waters of the Yangtze, its location was unique and richly endowed with natural advantages.

The last time Duan Ling had come here, he hadn't passed through the city gates. Now, he was finally going to see the place his father had spoken of so often when he was alive. He'd heard of its distinct seasons: spring abloom with peach blossoms, summer draped in lush greenery and accompanied by the symphony of cicadas, autumn awash with swirling maple leaves, winter blanketed in a gleaming layer of snow. Jiang Prefectural City was as picturesque as he'd imagined, a flourishing haven within the mortal realm.

As the ferry approached the pier, the commotion of freight being loaded and unloaded reached a crescendo. Southern Chen was undergoing a relocation of its entire imperial capital, and cargo was stacked everywhere around the docks. Duan Ling helped Wu Du disembark their vessel and climbed into the carriage again. Once settled, he immediately drew the curtain aside to peer curiously at the crowds thronging the roads.

Jiang Prefectural City was a grand metropolis that rose from flat ground, spared the ravages of war since ancient times. After thousands of years of peace, the massive city had expanded to become home to over five hundred thousand households. Its city walls stretched for hundreds of li, and its bustling main avenues were themselves ten li long.

“Hey, Wu Du.” Duan Ling nudged him. “This city is bigger and busier than Xichuan. Why didn’t my grandpa move the capital here?”

“Because of Zhao Kui,” Wu Du answered. “Xie You and Zhao Kui always butted heads. The late emperor once said millions of lives were spared only because Xie You and Zhao Kui each took a step backward.”

Duan Ling looked thoughtful. A struggle for power between generals would likely have a greater impact—and graver consequences—than one between civil ministers. Xie You and Zhao Kui both held immense military might within their grasp. Out of consideration for the lives of the common people, Duan Ling’s grandfather had established the capital in Xichuan in order to avoid infighting between two of Chen’s great generals. The loss of Jiang Prefectural City as an imperial capital was outweighed by the gain in balancing these military powers.

Their carriage driver had also never been to Jiang Prefectural City, and as he traversed the busy streets, he soon lost his way.

Jiang Prefectural City was structurally quite different from Xichuan. The new capital was divided into an inner city and an outer city. The inner city had historically housed Jiang Prefecture’s regional government; however, following the capital’s relocation, it had been transformed into the imperial palace.

The outer city was organized in a series of concentric rings, each with gated entrances marking the transition between zones. The outermost ring was a residential zone consisting of one hundred and eight neighborhoods, which accommodated a thousand households each. Moving inward, the next ring was the commercial district where businesses flourished; its main street —the longest in the city—wrapped around the entire city. Another ring inward was a mix of schools, taverns, and family homes. In total there were ninety-six districts. Structured like the chart of heavenly stems and earthly branches or the geomantic compass, the interconnected rings wrapped around each other in intricate loops.

The rings were disorienting Wu Du as well, unfortunately.

“Haven’t you been here before?” Duan Ling asked as he looked around the streets.

“I’d forgotten about the layout. I got lost the first time I came, too, and ended up wandering all over the city. Zheng Yan was the one who rescued me from this maze.”

“Does Skychaser know the way?” Duan Ling asked. “Maybe we could let him lead us.”

Duan Ling had guessed correctly: Skychaser cantered through the streets with easy familiarity. He led the carriage down an alleyway, crossed another lane, and re-emerged onto the main avenue. To Duan Ling, used to the gridded system of Shangjing and Xichuan’s streets, the layout of Jiang Prefectural City was just as confusing as it was to the other two. By the time he began to get his bearings, Skychaser was already stopped at the palace gates, waiting impatiently for the carriage to catch up.

As they rolled to a halt, the sound of a gong rang down the main avenue, clearing the path for a magnificent carriage. A soldier in black-plated armor astride a tall horse barked at them, “Who dares block the road?!”

Duan Ling was badly startled. “Who’s in that carriage?”

“I’ll take care of it,” Wu Du said. “Stay in here. And don’t be scared.”

“Wu-qing?” came Cai Yan’s voice from the distance. To the surprise of his entourage, Cai Yan climbed down from his carriage and called over to Wu Du: “You’re back!”

Cai Yan hadn’t recognized their carriage, but he immediately recognized Skychaser.

Duan Ling peeked from a slit in the curtain and spied a long procession of royal carriages. An elegant vehicle behind the crown prince’s was being pulled by a team of eight horses. With that level of pomp, the one on board could only be his uncle—the present emperor, Li Yanqiu.

Just their luck. They had come to the new palace on the exact same day as the crown prince and the emperor.

Leaning on a crutch, Wu Du limped forward to approach the royal procession. Cai Yan held up a hand for him to stop. He walked over instead to inquire after his well-being, asking, “How did you get hurt so badly?”

“My own fault,” Wu Du replied coolly. “I was careless and underestimated the enemy. But it’s a minor injury; I’ll recover in a few months.”

Everyone fell silent at his answer. Xie You stared incredulously at this newly modest Wu Du, as if he didn’t know him.

“I’ll summon an imperial physician to take a look at you later,” Cai Yan said. “You’ve worked hard this trip.”

“I will greet His Majesty properly when I’m fully recovered,” Wu Du said. He saluted Cai Yan with cupped hands. “Congratulations to Your Highness on the successful relocation of the capital. The terrain here is magnificent, like a coiled dragon and a crouched tiger. I’m certain this move will usher in a new era of peace and prosperity for the nation.”

Cai Yan smiled, delighted. “I heard there was someone else who went to Tong Pass with you…”

Inside the carriage, Duan Ling stiffened.

“Wang Shan is still in Tong Pass,” Wu Du responded with ease. “He didn’t come back with me. I’m sure he’ll leave in a few more days.”

“Very good,” Cai Yan said. “I look forward to meeting him when he returns.”

Duan Ling listened to the exchange with mixed feelings. He couldn’t see Cai Yan from this angle, but he did cautiously peel back the door curtain to peer at the emperor’s carriage.

At that same moment, Xie You drew back the curtain of the other carriage, and Li Yanqiu descended. In a mild tone, he said, “I was wondering where Skychaser went. Now I see that Wu Du had ridden him away.”

Duan Ling jolted as if struck by lightning. It was like he was staring at the very person he’d yearned for in his dreams for over a year. The man’s eyes, brows, lips, even his demeanor so resembled his father’s. A strange feeling awoke in him, one that seemed to have always been dormant in his veins. It was just like that moment, in the spring of that year, when his father had appeared behind him as he tended his flowers. The sight of his uncle had somehow raised Li Jianhong from the dead.

“Your Majesty.” Wu Du greeted him with a cupped-hand salute.

“Just as well,” Li Yanqiu said with no change in tone. “Since you rode off with our Li family’s horse, come back as a guest advisor to the Eastern Palace in the future. It’s fate, between you and Rong-er.”

Li Yanqiu took a few steps forward and waited expectantly for a response that never came. Wu Du remained silent. He neither thanked his imperial majesty for the grace nor nodded his head in acquiescence. Cai Yan’s expression darkened in an alarming manner, and the air thickened with a tangible awkwardness. It was Xie You, at last, who broke the silence.

“Wu Du, did you hear His Majesty?”

“Yeah,” Wu Du mumbled.

Fortunately, Cai Yan knew when to bend. “Uncle, perhaps that can wait until his injuries are healed.”

“As you say,” Li Yanqiu replied. “Well, it certainly has been a while since we saw you.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty, for your concern…” Wu Du trailed off.

Li Yanqiu hadn’t directed his words to Wu Du, but to Skychaser. When Skychaser spotted Li Yanqiu, he slowly trotted toward him. Li Yanqiu put a foot in the stirrups and pulled himself up onto the saddle, then tugged on the reins, turning the horse’s head toward the gates.

“We’ll head into the palace first, then,” he said to Xie You.

Li Yanqiu extended a hand down to Cai Yan to pull his nephew onto the horse as well. Before Cai Yan could accept it, Skychaser turned his back, snubbing him. The horse’s hooves rang against the stone as he slowly carried Li Yanqiu away from the crown prince and brought him instead toward a different carriage.

Duan Ling had been engrossed in watching the scene play out; before he realized what was happening, Skychaser had brought Li Yanqiu right up to the other side of the curtain.

Wu Du cursed inwardly, his face falling. Duan Ling had never anticipated this turn of events either. By chance, Li Yanqiu glanced past the opening of the curtain and met Duan Ling’s startled gaze.

They locked eyes for the briefest of seconds before Duan Ling twisted away to break the connection. He felt as if his heart had been dealt a heavy blow.

Chapter 91

LI YANQIU LAPSED into silence beside the carriage, as if dazed. After a moment, he chided the horse gently, “Skychaser, are you acting disobediently now that you’ve had a new master?”

Skychaser answered with a snort.

Li Yanqiu snapped the reins to urge him onward. “Hyah!”

Skychaser danced in place, but it still took him a few more seconds before he reluctantly turned back and trotted down the street. Both Xie You and Cai Yan chuckled at the sight.

“Onward to the palace!” Li Yanqiu called to the procession in a sonorous voice. To Wu Du, he said, “We’ll borrow Skychaser for now and return him in a few days. By the looks of you, we doubt you’ll be riding any time soon.”

Wu Du nodded.

“Was it this headstrong horse that did your ankle in?” Xie You quipped. The crowd broke into uproarious laughter. Even Li Yanqiu had a chuckle.

“Get well soon,” Cai Yan bade Wu Du when the snickers died down.

Li Yanqiu spurred Skychaser into a gallop, and the horse shot toward the palace. A gust of wind swept past, setting maple leaves swirling in the emperor’s wake. As he left the rest of them in the dust, the billowing yellow edge of his royal cloak mingled with the scraps of crimson scattering through the air.

Wu Du watched until Li Yanqiu vanished into the distance before he turned and climbed back into the carriage.

“Sorry,” Duan Ling blurted immediately.

The apology shook Wu Du from his thoughts. He blinked, perplexed. “Huh?”

Duan Ling thought Xie You and Li Yanqiu had been rude to Wu Du; their mockery of him had upset Duan Ling. What was more, Wu Du had only gotten hurt because of him. At the end of the day, the Li family was in his debt.

When Wu Du realized what Duan Ling meant, he was amused. He shook his head, brushing off the sentiment. “It’s nothing.”

Duan Ling was surprised to find Wu Du so broad-minded. Before, he’d have been angry for a good half day if Changliu-jun were to so much as mutter a single derisive word in his presence. Now, he appeared completely unconcerned.

Wu Du propped an elbow on the windowsill and gazed out at the golden leaves adorning the trees lining the road. Duan Ling shuffled over and lay his head on his shoulder from behind.

“His Majesty didn’t see you earlier, did he?” Wu Du asked, turning his head.

Duan Ling replayed the fleeting moment in his mind and shook his head. Though he was certain their eyes had met, the bamboo curtain between them ensured Li Yanqiu couldn’t have gotten a good look at him.

“What sort of person is he?” Duan Ling asked.

“He has a weak constitution and is often ill because of it,” Wu Du said. “Someone who’s sick so often is always going to have a bit of a temper.”

Autumn sun shone down on Li Yanqiu as he reined Skychaser to a halt outside Taihe Hall. A brisk early-evening breeze swept through, setting the imperial banners flanking the grand staircase aflutter. As he dismounted, the Black-Plated Army arrayed in the plaza all dropped to one knee, thunderous as a towering wave crashing down.

“Long live the emperor!”

Distracted, Li Yanqiu seemed not to hear them. He was lost in reminiscence of the split second when he’d been struck by an immense sense of *something*, and only snapped out of it when Xie You and Cai Yan made their unhurried way over to him.

“Thank you for today,” Li Yanqiu said.

Like a receding tide, the Black-Plated Army fell back to make way for the emperor. Li Yanqiu ascended the grand staircase and entered the main hall, where a eunuch stepped up and unfastened his cloak. Thus divested, Li Yanqiu continued down the corridor. The Jiang Prefecture palace had suffered damage from storms in the past, but after its latest renovation, it was even grander and more majestic than the palace in Xichuan.

Zheng Yan and Lang Junxia had arrived ahead of them. Li Yanqiu glanced toward the Eastern Palace as he passed and spotted Lang Junxia sitting against the railing of the open-air corridor, playing a flute. Though he undoubtedly saw Li Yanqiu, he did not rise to bow.

Li Yanqiu ignored Lang Junxia in turn, and glanced at Cai Yan, trailing behind him. “It’s been a long journey. Go get some rest.”

With a nod to acknowledge the dismissal, Cai Yan replied, “The auspicious hour for the heaven worship ceremony to mark the completion of the move is early tomorrow morning. Be sure to rest too, Uncle.”

“Our home might have changed, but our medicine needs to be drunk all the same. Don’t you worry,” Li Yanqiu said.

Cai Yan and his entourage of Eastern Palace attendants bent low at the waist to respectfully bid Li Yanqiu farewell.

Inside the Palace of Changqiu, the empress’s ladies-in-waiting were inspecting the trunks containing clothes, accessories, and powder. Mu Jinzhi sat before a mirror, painting on her eyebrows. She glanced at Li Yanqiu in the reflection as he entered the room, arching her expertly drawn brows at his expression.

“Has someone provoked Your Majesty’s ire?” she asked with a small smile.

“No one has provoked my ire,” Li Yanqiu replied, coming up behind her. “The empress has sharp eyes, but even she is mistaken at times.”

Mu Jinzhi set down a hairpin she was considering and said offhandedly, “The order with regard to the crown prince’s guest advisors

has been issued. Once the imperial examinations are over, we'll select a few qualified candidates for him."

"The empress has put her heart into this matter." Li Yanqiu thanked her with impeccable manners.

Though married, the couple had little interest in conversation. After this brief exchange, Li Yanqiu departed his empress's rooms. Mu Jinzhi silently watched his retreating back in her mirror.

Back in his own bedchamber, Li Yanqiu gazed at the clear blue skies outside the window. In the corridor beyond, Zheng Yan was leaning against the railing, ordering the attendants to search for jars of wine in the trunks.

"Zheng Yan," Li Yanqiu called, frowning slightly. "Why are you here?"

"The crown prince scorns me, Your Majesty," Zheng Yan said lightly. "With Wuluohou Mu returned, this subject found it unnecessary to put myself in the way of his contempt. Wouldn't we all be happier out of each other's faces?"

"An unnamable rage filled me when I saw Wuluohou Mu today," Li Yanqiu said, in an equally amiable tone. "Each and every one of you Four Great Assassins is crooked, yet now it would seem Wu Du—the least successful of you—is the most decent of the lot. I've always wondered if Wu Du poisoned you three somehow, such that you ended up so contrary."

His scolding words very much included Zheng Yan. Between the two Li brothers, one was outwardly sharp in his radiance, while the other hid his needles in velvet. Zheng Yan, long familiar with Li Yanqiu's temper, saw at once that he was truly angered.

Immediately, Zheng Yan conceded. "Forgive me, Your Majesty. This subject will go to the Eastern Palace at once."

Only after Zheng Yan left did Li Yanqiu heave a lengthy sigh.

A palace maid appeared in the doorway with a platter. "Your Majesty, it's time for your medicine."

Li Yanqiu carelessly grabbed the bowl, tossed back its contents, and flung it into the yard. The glass shattered into pieces with a delicate crash.

“Wowww!”

Duan Ling had arrived at their new home. The prime minister’s residence had allocated to Wu Du and Duan Ling a courtyard only one alley away from the main manor. It was considerably bigger than their remote courtyard in Xichuan, featuring two entrances, four wings, and a stone spirit screen just inside the main gate. There was even a backyard for them to stable horses. A steward and two servants had been assigned to attend to their needs. The courtyard contained a pond framed by a garden rockery, a peach tree, and a cluster of bamboo around the back. Hollow bamboo pipes ran over the courtyard walls, channeling running water from the main manor. A gentle trickle flowed into the pond and drained through the winding channels throughout the garden.

“His Excellency bids my lords to settle in and refresh yourselves from your travels. A banquet will be held later this evening to celebrate your return,” the steward informed them.

“You’re all dismissed. No need to serve us,” Wu Du said to him.

Duan Ling was still touring his new home, checking this room and that. The entire house was appointed with fine brocade throws and beautiful partition screens; even the decorative vases were of fine blue porcelain. The luxury reminded him of Qionghua House. He peered around another corner: There was even a study for him.

The steward assisted Wu Du into the hall. As though he’d anticipated Wu Du’s attempt to dismiss him, he acknowledged it with a simple “yes m’lord” and returned to his place in the yard.

Duan Ling considered for a moment and reworded the command: “Lord Wu’s home is full of classified information, not to mention the many poisonous items lying around. We don’t want to risk injuring any of you by accident; there’s no need to stay in the courtyard. If we require anything, I will make the request myself at the main manor. Please, leave us.”

Only when he put it like this did the steward at last nod. He bowed to Duan Ling and Wu Du and saw himself out.

It was much easier to talk when no one else was around—if these servants were to overhear something they shouldn’t, Wu Du and Duan Ling might find themselves dead before they knew it.

“There’s money too!” Duan Ling exclaimed from the next room. “Two hundred taels of gold!”

Duan Ling had reported the Tong Pass treasure to Mu Kuangda, but he had no idea what Mu Kuangda would do with that mountain of gold—if he were to spend it, the sum was more than enough to acquire a whole city. Dispensing this bit of reward money was nothing to him, but Duan Ling was pleased nonetheless. At least he and Wu Du could look forward to more than flatbread for every meal.

Seated in the bedchamber, Wu Du responded, “What do you want to eat? I’ll go out and grab it.”

“Sit still and don’t move,” Duan Ling chided. Hugging his own roll of blankets to his chest, Duan Ling came into the bedroom and shooed Wu Du over. After laying down his bedding, he added a second pillow.

Watching Duan Ling bustle about, Wu Du said, “You can take the bed. I’ll sleep on the floor beside it. To protect you.”

“What if I get up in the middle of the night for water and trample you to death?” Duan Ling asked, grinning.

They were the same words he himself had said to Duan Ling months ago when he’d asked to sleep near him. Suddenly finding the situation funny, they both laughed.

“At least let me make the bed,” Wu Du insisted.

“Can’t you do as you’re told?” Duan Ling demanded.

“Okay, okay,” Wu Du relented. “But you have to give me something to do. I’m injured, not disabled.”

Being doted on like this by Duan Ling was genuinely making Wu Du uncomfortable, and it wasn’t only because of Duan Ling’s true identity. In all his life, no one had ever cared for him so attentively.

“Why don’t you take a bath, then,” Duan Ling suggested.

Wu Du raised an arm and took a whiff of his sleeves—then flushed bright red at the scent.

Duan Ling went out to ask the servants for bath water. The boy servants hauled in a large tub, placed it in the corner room, and filled it with

boiling-hot water mixed with cold.

“I’ll wash myself,” Wu Du quickly said.

“Oh, just strip,” Duan Ling said.

Once he’d done so, Duan Ling took Wu Du’s discarded clothes to the backyard and dumped them in a basin. He drew water from the well and filled the basin to soak them, then returned to the bedroom to search for clean robes. The steward from earlier had seen to all the unpacking, and everything was neatly organized—Mu Kuangda had assigned the right man for the job. Duan Ling wanted to kick himself for forgetting to reward him.

Shortly thereafter, Duan Ling returned to the corner room with a stack of clean clothes. Wu Du’s left hand was still wrapped in bandages; he couldn’t submerge it in water, so he’d been scrubbing himself one-handed. When he saw Duan Ling come back in, his handsome face blushed all the way to the base of his throat.

Duan Ling, unfazed, merely rolled up his sleeves and pressed down on Wu Du’s shoulder to keep him still. Then he set to work scrubbing Wu Du clean. He hadn’t bathed properly since the night of the battle. His left arm rested on the edge of the tub, his muscular shoulder and arm stretched out for Duan Ling to wash.

“Don’t fall in,” Wu Du cautioned him. “Hold up, hold up, d-don’t wash down there!”

The bathtub was large, and Duan Ling had already leaned halfway in over the rim. Wu Du understood Duan Ling was trying to attentively wash him, but those roaming hands were about to make him lose it.

“Lift your leg a little,” Duan Ling ordered.

Wu Du found Duan Ling’s no-nonsense manner too funny. He couldn’t help teasing him. He playfully grabbed Duan Ling around the waist and yanked him into the tub; with a giant splash, water sloshed over the rim and onto the floor.

“You!” Duan Ling sputtered angrily, now soaked to the skin.

Though his cheeks were still red, Wu Du said, laughing, “You bathe. I’m done.”

“You’re still too dirty; don’t you move,” Duan Ling scolded.

He untied his inner robe and stripped out of his wet clothes. Now naked, he straddled Wu Du's lap. A strange sensation welled up in him—something entirely new, unlike every other time he'd been pressed skin to skin with Wu Du.

Duan Ling felt his own cheeks grow hot. It was almost like that night when, as a child, he'd spied on Lang Junxia's bare body through the window lattice—except this time, as he faced Wu Du, his heart pounded even harder. It was as if something unknown—something thrilling—was waiting for him just beyond some final veil.

"Why'd you stop talking?" Wu Du patted Duan Ling's fair back and gazed at him, curious, his injured arm still draped lazily over the edge of the tub.

"It's n-nothing," Duan Ling replied nervously.

Wu Du seemed to have sensed the shift as well, and his eyes twinkled. Duan Ling dodged his gaze with a noncommittal hum, ducking his head and occupying himself anew with the task of scrubbing Wu Du's chest.

Footsteps sounded from outside the room. Both of them froze.

"Hey, buddy. You owe me a drink, eh!" came Zheng Yan's lazy drawl.

Duan Ling started. Never having met Zheng Yan, he thought the voice belonged to someone from the main manor who had let themselves into their courtyard. Before he could react, Wu Du wrapped his uninjured arm securely around his waist and drew him closer. Holding the naked Duan Ling flush against his own body, Wu Du pressed Duan Ling's head down onto his shoulder.

Zheng Yan's stride didn't pause for an instant; he pushed open the room's door without hesitation, only to find Wu Du soaking in the bath with his arm around a fair young man.

"Zheng Yan! Are you blind?!" Wu Du snapped. "Get the hell out!"

Zheng Yan doubled over cackling—he was laughing so hard he choked. He closed the door at once. "Carry on! Sorry, sorry—honestly, I didn't think you had it in you."

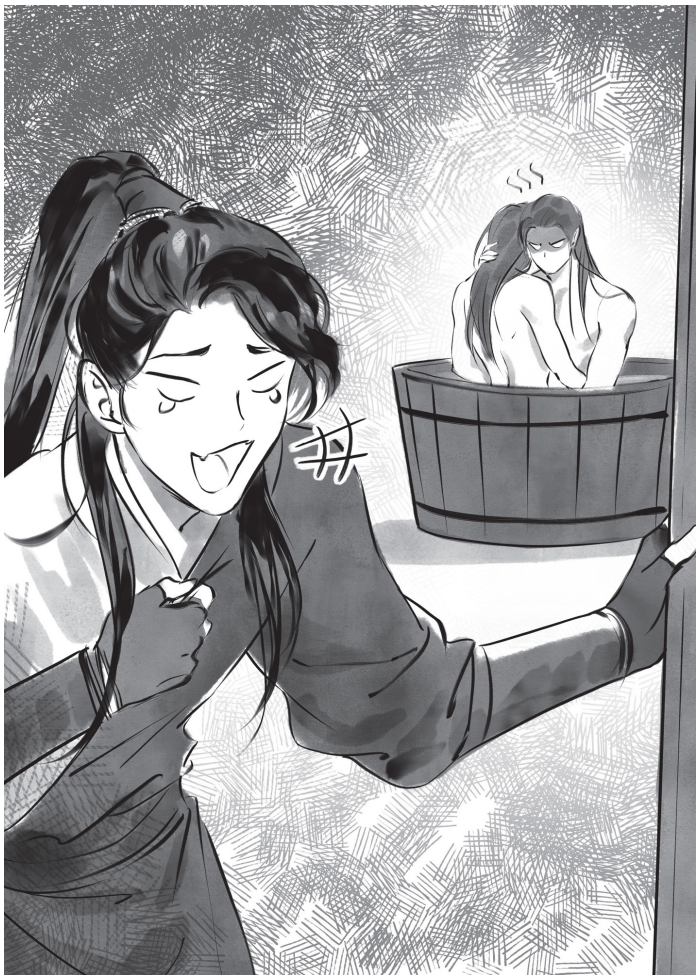
“Shut up and wait outside!” Wu Du said.

Once Zheng Yan’s footsteps receded, Duan Ling tentatively lifted his head. Pressed against Wu Du, wholly naked, he could feel both their heartbeats racing—and lower, below the water, both their bodies stirring from the adrenaline. They sat facing each other, breathing unevenly. Wu Du made a quick silencing gesture, then motioned that they should continue bathing. Duan Ling swallowed hard, but nonetheless reached out and quickly began washing Wu Du’s hair.

“Done,” Duan Ling whispered a minute later.

He clambered out of the tub with such haste he nearly slipped on the wet floor. Wu Du’s hand shot out to catch him around the waist, steadying him. “Careful,” he chided.

Duan Ling toweled himself dry at the fastest possible speed and slipped on his pants in a fluster. He waited until his burning cheeks had cooled slightly before helping Wu Du step out of the tub. He moved to pat Wu Du dry as well, but when he reached his groin and the towel brushed over Wu Du’s still quite impressive erection, both blushed anew.



Wu Du’s injuries were healing well; he could now walk with only a slight limp. Wrapped in a fresh bathrobe, he slipped into his wooden clogs and limped down the corridor, passing Zheng Yan on his way to rummage in the master bedroom.

“So quick?” Zheng Yan called after him. “I didn’t scare you into finishing early, did I?”

Wu Du barked something at Zheng Yan, and Duan Ling was startled to hear Wu Du truly swear for the first time. It didn’t take long for the sound of clogs clacking against the wooden floor to return as Wu Du made his way back at a more measured pace. He handed Duan Ling a set of fresh clothes and gestured for him to dress.

Once they were both presentable, the servants came to haul away the bathtub. Wu Du’s hair was still dripping. He reclined on the divan clad in only the bathrobe, feet bare, and raised his left hand for Duan Ling to change the wound dressing. Only when the bandage was secured did he turn his attention back to Zheng Yan.

Chapter 92

"I'M STILL RECOVERING," Wu Du said disinterestedly. "You can drink wine; I'll stick with medicine." He raised his medicine bowl in a toast.

Exasperated, Zheng Yan mumbled, "I've heard *that* before."

Wu Du knew where Zheng Yan had come from and whom he'd seen, so he let this remark pass without comment. He didn't introduce Zheng Yan to Duan Ling, wholly ignoring the matter. Zheng Yan studied Duan Ling anyway as he waited for an introduction that never came. The corners of his lips inched upward as time dragged on, and he arched his brows pointedly at Wu Du—*Not gonna introduce me?*

"Stop being so nosy," Wu Du snapped. "Why are you here?"

"Wang Shan," Duan Ling said, taking the introductions into his own hands. "Nice to meet you, Zheng-xiong."

Zheng Yan eyed Duan Ling critically as he took a seat on the floor and leaned against the table. "You remind me of someone."

Wu Du and Duan Ling both stiffened.

"He resembles your future mother-in-law a tad, don't you think?" Zheng Yan said to Wu Du, then burst out laughing.

Wu Du was instantly furious from embarrassment. "Get out!"

"Your future mother-in-law?" Duan Ling asked.

"Get me the emetics—I think he needs to empty his stomach," Wu Du ordered in a cold tone.

Zheng Yan flapped a hand, promising to stop messing around. To Duan Ling he said, "The Marquis of Huaiyin's wife, Princess Duanping."

Another thought struck Duan Ling. He asked with a smile, "What looks do we share?"

Zheng Yan swept a hand past the corner of his mouth, and Duan Ling understood he meant that his lips were what was similar.

“Don’t even mention Yao Zheng in front of me. You don’t know how much I loathe her.” Wu Du scowled.

“When are you planning to pay a visit to the Eastern Palace?” Zheng Yan asked lazily. “The crown prince was just talking about you earlier today.”

Wu Du gave Duan Ling’s hand a subtle squeeze—*Don’t worry*.

“He summons and dismisses whomever and however he pleases,” Wu Du replied. “Of course he’d think of me after Wuluohou Mu ran off. Looks like your service hasn’t impressed him either, Zheng Yan.”

“He didn’t run off—he’s already back,” Zheng Yan said. “He arrived the day before the crown prince set out for the new capital.”

Wu Du’s brows rose. But, on second thought, perhaps it was to be expected. “Is the crown prince upset?” Wu Du asked.

Zheng Yan shook his head. “Not sure. Doesn’t seem that way.”

“What’s that guy’s story anyway?” Wu Du wondered aloud. “I never understood why the late emperor took him in, back in the day.”

Duan Ling’s heart began to race. He knew Wu Du was asking on his behalf. Zheng Yan and the Marquis of Huaiyin shared a friendship; it was possible he knew more than any member of the court.

Sure enough, Zheng Yan answered: “Wuluohou is a Xianbei surname—and a royal one at that.”

Wu Du twirled the bowl in his hands without comment.

“I’ve heard a few things about the Nameless Assassin’s past from the Marquis of Huaiyin,” Zheng Yan continued. “The Xianbei kingdom of Wuluohou fell a hundred years ago after fighting three battles against Great Chen. They left their lands and led their people into the depths of the Xianbei Mountains. They likely all took new names and traded their swords for bows, becoming hunters. Then, about twenty years ago, Chen and Yuan had a small clash in the Xianbei Mountains.”

“The Battle of Changlin,” Duan Ling supplied.

“That’s the one.” Zheng Yan found it strange that Duan Ling knew of it, but didn’t comment.

“I read about it in the prime minister’s memorial collection,” Duan Ling explained. It was the truth. Back when he’d studied in the prime minister’s residence in Xichuan, the tutor had instructed him and Mu Qing to do a textual analysis on a piece detailing the Battle of Changlin. The battle record had been harrowing.

“He’s Mu Qing’s study companion,” Wu Du casually added. “Don’t bully scholars, Zheng Yan. They’re full of wily schemes.”

“Mm, so they are,” Zheng Yan agreed. “Scholars aren’t to be crossed. Offend one, and the others will curse you in their writings for the rest of history.”

Duan Ling laughed.

Zheng Yan resumed his tale. “During that clash, Chen and Yuan turned the Xianbei Mountains into their battlefield. The relentless cycles of war—the Yuan forces advancing, the Chen army retreating; Chen counterattacking, Yuan withdrawing—took the lives of too many of what remained of the Wuluohou people. Wuluohou Mu was likely around eight years old at that time.”

“Was his village destroyed?” Duan Ling asked.

“Perhaps,” Zheng Yan replied. “Later, after the armies retreated, a martial arts expert by the name of Li Xin rescued Wuluohou Mu. He brought him to his sect in Lunan and took him on as a disciple. The commanding general of Li Xin’s regiment was a man named Qin Zhao. General Qin reported the incident to the Marquis of Huaiyin, though he only mentioned a child and not the boy’s name. That’s why, for many years, no one knew Wuluohou Mu’s real name.”

“I only knew him as the Nameless Assassin,” Wu Du agreed.

“Yep.” Zheng Yan poured himself another cup. “Later still, Qin Zhao gave his life in the Battle of Shangzi. Many years later, the Li clan’s Altar of Tempering Swords Sect was obliterated in a single night, and one of its disciples absconded with the blade Chilling Edge. The White Tiger Sect dispatched assassins to go after the thief, and you know the rest. The disciple escaped capture and hid here, there, and everywhere until the late emperor took him under his wing. Since the late emperor wielded the

Guardian of the Realm, no assassin from the White Tiger Sect could defy him. It's the ancestral creed."

"If Wuluohou Mu is there, then I'm not joining the Eastern Palace as a guest advisor," Wu Du said. "He's always looked down on me."

Zheng Yan snickered. "It's only been a few days and you act like a changed man. Is it because you're the big man of your little household now that you've matured instead of being so reckless?"

"Zheng Yan, Master Wu might not poison you to death, but it'd be nothing for me to silence your voice for three months," Wu Du threatened.

"Boring—!" Zheng Yan braced his hands on his knees and boosted himself to his feet. "So. When are we going for a stroll outside the palace?"

"Can't you see I'm injured? I'm not strolling anywhere," Wu Du replied coolly. "Let's see how things play out. Stay clear of my place if you don't have anything urgent to say, or you'll drag me down with you. Now off you go."

"You won't be able to avoid him for long, you know," Zheng Yan said, sounding sympathetic.

"I said: Off you go."

Zheng Yan nodded and sauntered out, grinning broadly. Duan Ling gave Wu Du a questioning look, and Wu Du nodded his approval. Duan Ling rose to accompany their guest to the gates, where Zheng Yan mounted his horse and rode off. To his surprise, he found Skychaser waiting outside the main entrance. Zheng Yan had obviously been the one to bring him back. Duan Ling led the horse to the stable in the backyard and stroked his head once he was settled in.

"He came to sound you out on behalf of the crown prince," Duan Ling said when he returned to the bedroom.

"You thought so too?" Wu Du asked, surprised.

Duan Ling nodded. "The crown prince must have asked him to bring Skychaser back while he was at it."

Wu Du lapsed into a contemplative silence, lounging on the divan. He appeared relaxed, but his brows were drawn low.

Even now, there were a few things Duan Ling couldn't parse. He hadn't asked Wu Du about them on the road, letting them percolate in the back of his mind instead—but now that Zheng Yan had brought up Lang Junxia, the questions resurfaced: His father's exhortations against trusting him. Lang Junxia's disguise as the carriage driver that final day in Shangjing. His bringing back a fake crown prince amid the nation's time of crisis, thereby spoiling Mu Kuangda's plans. The poisoned meal and throwing Duan Ling into the river.

Yet, despite it all, when they'd met again in Tong Pass…Lang Junxia, for whatever reason, had saved Duan Ling's life, even going so far as to kill Helan Jie in order to keep Duan Ling safe.

"When you saved me from the poison, you called it Nirvana's Calling," Duan Ling said. "What is it, exactly?"

"It's a poison of emptiness. The victim won't be able to talk or think; their mind will be muddled. The effect mimics death. If the victim doesn't receive the antidote within twenty-four hours, they'll live the rest of their life as a walking corpse."

Duan Ling's heart lurched. "Then maybe he didn't really want to kill me."

Wu Du glanced at him. "Maybe. It's also possible he wanted to turn you into a mindless puppet that obeyed his every order, so you could be useful in the future."

"Where's this poison from?" Duan Ling couldn't help but be curious.

"There have been poison users since ancient times who used this substance to control sovereigns or high ministers," Wu Du explained. "Say, for example, an influential minister on a contested frontier. Killing him would do more harm than good, so Nirvana's Calling might be used to puppet him until some objective is achieved. His body could then be disposed of at a later time."

The fact that this poison could be neutralized suggested Lang Junxia hadn't wanted to fully eliminate Duan Ling—at least, not at that moment. Could Lang Junxia have been protecting him by poisoning him? Perhaps with the intention of saving him after throwing him in the river? The question had plagued Duan Ling more than once. But such thoughts were

too wishful. The truth was, he'd be stupid to trust Lang Junxia again. This was also why he hadn't asked Wu Du about Lang Junxia before.

"He didn't try to kill me at Tong Pass," Duan Ling said.

"Tong Pass would've been thrown into chaos if you were killed. Since the night he saw you with me in Xichuan, he's probably been keeping an eye on you. Our trip to Tong Pass was obviously on the prime minister's orders. Attacking you recklessly would not only raise suspicions—it'd also ruin Prime Minister Mu's plans. If he's working with the crown prince, that wouldn't help them; they still need the Mu clan's cooperation to achieve their goals."

"He missed two opportunities to kill me: Once on that tree on Qin Ridge, and once on the walls of Tong Pass," Duan Ling pointed out, frowning.

Wu Du hummed noncommittally. The conversation was starting to grate on him, but he didn't dare blow up at Duan Ling.

However, Duan Ling was the sharpest crown prince Southern Chen had ever had—perhaps in its entire history. He keenly observed that Wu Du didn't appreciate his attempts to exonerate Lang Junxia in his analysis and dropped the subject while he went to retrieve the salve for Wu Du's ankle. By now his foot was almost as good as new. He'd be walking on it normally in just a few more days, though using qinggong to scale walls and leap across roofs would require a longer recuperation.

"Are you upset?" Duan Ling asked, opting to be direct.

Wu Du was instantly awkward. "What? N-no…"

Duan Ling worked the salve into Wu Du's skin, then quirked a finger and tickled the bottom of his foot.

"Hey!" Wu Du yelped.

But Duan Ling didn't let up. Wu Du's cheeks reddened, but it wasn't as if he could beat Duan Ling up. He slumped helplessly back against the divan and hollered for him to stop between fits of giggles. Unable to take it anymore, he caught Duan Ling and flipped them over. With one hand, he grabbed Duan Ling's wrists and pinned them above his head, trapping Duan

Ling beneath him and tickling him in return. The pair wrestled on the divan, laughing until they were breathless.

“Okay! No more!” Duan Ling yelped at last.

“Let’s see you try that again,” Wu Du hissed in his ear, hand still gripping Duan Ling’s wrists. “Don’t make Master Wu teach you a lesson.”

Both their cheeks were equally pink. Duan Ling stared up at Wu Du, his eyes sparkling. Their hearts raced, and butterflies fluttered in their stomachs. But before anything could happen, Wu Du released Duan Ling and pulled him upright. Suddenly shy, both slipped into an awkward silence, neither knowing quite what to say next.

A knock on the front gates rescued them.

“Who is it?” Wu Du called out.

Just as Duan Ling rolled off the divan and started for the door, Mu Qing burst through the gates. “Wang Shan! I’ve been waiting for you for so long! Where in the world did you disappear to?!”

Duan Ling was happy to see Mu Qing again, all things considered. He rushed over and hugged him. Wu Du’s comment about his heartless treatment of this young man sprang into his mind, and he couldn’t help stealing a glance back at him. He found Wu Du watching the exchange and felt awkward having caught the look on his face.

“I went to Tong Pass,” Duan Ling explained to Mu Qing.

He shot another look at Wu Du, who took the hint and reluctantly said, “Please, come in.”

They were in the prime minister’s residence, but Wu Du was the master of this courtyard. Only after receiving his invitation did Mu Qing enter the hall, removing his shoes at the door. Duan Ling placed a small table on the divan and made tea. He offered the first cup to Wu Du, but Mu Qing didn’t seem to mind. He was simply happy to see Duan Ling and couldn’t stop grinning.

“The servants said they didn’t know whether you’d be coming to class tomorrow because of Wu Du’s injuries,” he said. “They kept telling me to wait patiently, but I couldn’t sit still. I had to come check on you.”

“How have things been while I was gone?” Duan Ling asked.

“Awful!” Mu Qing wailed. “I’ve been absolutely bored out of my mind!”

Duan Ling glanced meaningfully at Wu Du, who said, “Wang Shan will resume his usual studies with you starting tomorrow.”

“Are you coming tonight to see my dad?” Mu Qing asked. “Dad told me to ask. The banquet tonight is just a small family one; there won’t be any formal toasting.”

Duan Ling turned to Wu Du once again. Now that they were back, they had to report to Mu Kuangda eventually; they couldn’t hide forever.

“Of course we’ll attend,” Wu Du said. “Prime Minister Mu has been good enough not to fault us for delaying a day; we ought to see him regardless.”

Mu Qing found this response strange. Since when had Wu Du become so polite? After taking a single trip out, he was no longer walking around with his nose in the air, answering only with disdainful snorts and harrumphs.

“I’ll go back and let them know, then,” Mu Qing said. “See you at the side pavilion tonight.”

Duan Ling rose to walk him out, but Mu Qing waved him off and saw himself to the gates.

“I’m sure Prime Minister Mu will have plenty of questions for me tonight,” Duan Ling said after Mu Qing had gone. “I’m just worried if he really digs down, we might accidentally expose ourselves.”

Wu Du waved his hand. “Don’t worry, just count on me. I’ll answer the questions for you.”

He pushed himself up from the divan one-handed and got to his feet. Duan Ling retrieved the fine robes the prime minister’s residence had prepared for them, and both changed. Sure enough, clothes made the man. Wu Du’s transformation was striking—his tall and handsome figure was wonderfully complemented by the exquisite new Shu brocade robes with their tight-cuffed martial sleeves. Duan Ling, meanwhile, had donned a set in midnight blue. His fair complexion, contrasted against the silk’s dark hue, glowed with a pearlescence like that of fine jade.

Duan Ling stared at Wu Du's trim waist—he was still missing a pendant to hang from his belt. He raised his eyes to gaze at Wu Du in full, thinking, *When I get my jade pendant back, I'll tie the "Beautiful Land" half to his waist.*

"What is it?" Wu Du was similarly transfixed by the sight of Duan Ling.

"Nothing," Duan Ling said with a smile. "Let's go."

Chapter 93

BY THE TIME Zheng Yan returned to the Eastern Palace stables, dusk had fallen, the dim sky made even gloomier by a drizzling rain. Inside the hall, Cai Yan was having his dinner with Lang Junxia seated beside him.

"Well?" Cai Yan asked Zheng Yan as he entered the room.

"I sounded him out," Zheng Yan said, taking a seat at a different table. He picked up a cup of now-cold tea and sipped it. "From what I can see, Wu Du isn't eager to join the Eastern Palace. Skychaser has been returned."

Cai Yan chewed in silence.

"There's a young man in Wu Du's house as well," Zheng Yan added. "Wang Shan. He must be the special envoy Prime Minister Mu dispatched to Tong Pass. If you intend on winning over Wu Du and providing him an opportunity here, I'd advise you to direct your efforts toward that boy, Your Highness."

Cai Yan hummed his acknowledgment.

An announcement came from outside the door: "Your Highness, the man you asked for is here."

"Please send him in," Cai Yan said.

Lang Junxia's brow wrinkled at Cai Yan's use of *please*.

A gaunt man about thirty years of age stepped through the doors. He was rough-skinned, with bruises on his face, and his eyes were dark and gloomy. Dressed in a set of clean, coarse robes, he walked soundlessly, his wide gait stirring a breeze as he strode into the hall.

"This subject Feng greets Your Highness," the man said. With a flourish of his sleeves, he prostrated before Cai Yan.

"You never told me he was spared," Lang Junxia said, his voice ice-cold.

Zheng Yan flashed him a small smile. “Well, now you know, Wuluohou Mu. His Highness was being awfully benevolent. He kept it quiet in case it angered you—wouldn’t that have been just terrible for your health?”

Lang Junxia ignored Zheng Yan’s needling and swung his gaze to Cai Yan. Made awkward by the tense situation, Cai Yan cleared his throat and pointed at the last chair on his right side.

“Please rise, Feng. This seat is for you.”

Feng got to his feet and bowed to Lang Junxia and Zheng Yan.

“This sinful subject greets my lords,” he said.

“No human is without sin,” Cai Yan said. “Or the world would have no need for sages. Now that you’ve come to the Eastern Palace, please lead your life here with dignity.”

Feng gave a slight, quick smile and carefully sipped the cup of wine Cai Yan bestowed upon him, savoring its flavor. Outside the palace hall, the westerly wind stirred, sweeping swaths of crimson leaves from the trees and laying them across the garden grounds like pools of blood.

Beneath a tapestry of brilliant stars, the bleak autumn wind blew over the prime minister’s residence. Dazzling, colorful lanterns set the private banquet in the side pavilion aglow. A shadow puppetry troupe was performing the story of a wolf man from Jiang Prefectural City during the Yu Dynasty—the musical pluck of the strings was followed by a few verses sung while the shadows of the puppets swung gracefully this way and that against the curtain. The banquet’s main course, heavy on the table, was half a catty of male crabs and seven catties of female crabs served right in their steamer baskets.

Mu Qing watched the puppet show with fascination while Duan Ling shelled crabs for him. They chatted between the performances. Beside Duan Ling, Wu Du picked out tomalley and crab meat with his chopsticks and set them back inside the shell for Duan Ling, in case he missed out on hot food while attending Mu Qing.

“Is that for me?” Duan Ling asked him, grinning.

Wu Du merely gestured for him to eat, and so Duan Ling dug in.

“What have I missed?” Mu Kuangda announced his arrival with a chuckle. “The move is just completed, and there are many matters requiring my attention. I’m afraid I was delayed.”

The crowd quickly rose to their feet. Following Mu Kuangda at his left and right shoulder were Changliu-jun and Chang Pin, advisors both military and civil. Their presence at the banquet was a sign of respect toward Wu Du, and demonstrated the prime minister’s high regard for him.

“No need to apologize,” Wu Du answered. “The play kept things interesting.”

Everyone took turns bowing and greeting the prime minister. Once the niceties were dispensed with, Mu Kuangda turned to Chang Pin. “Your shishu is as elusive as they come. Had I known he planned to go to Liao, I would’ve ordered Wang Shan to cling to his leg and drag him back by force if necessary.”

The crowd tittered at the good-natured joke.

“Eat,” Mu Kuangda encouraged his guests. He turned to Duan Ling and Wu Du. “Don’t mind this old man. This feast is to welcome the two of you back. I’m just here to cadge a meal.”

Duan Ling smiled. “I’m sure you’re swamped, Your Excellency. With so much to do, we didn’t dare bother you when we first arrived.”

Mu Kuangda nodded approvingly. “You two have done your work well; now one of my greatest concerns is alleviated. No trouble will come to Tong Pass in the next ten years, at the least. When I spoke of the matter to His Majesty earlier today, His Majesty extended his greatest appreciation for you, Wu Du.”

Wu Du hummed a muted acknowledgment. “All thanks to you, Your Excellency.”

Many in the hall exchanged quiet looks with each other, though none commented aloud. They too had noticed the change in Wu Du.

Smiling, Chang Pin shifted the topic. “In the past, I wanted to follow my shishu—yet since our goodbye ten years ago, I haven’t heard from him. It’s a stroke of luck that you were able to meet him, Wang Shan.”

“Mister Fei is in good health,” Duan Ling replied.

During their mission at Tong Pass, Duan Ling had communicated solely through letters. Now he recounted their journey in detail, from their first arrival in the city to the last battle—as he told it, it had been a truly harrowing adventure. Of course, he credited Wu Du for most of their plans to avoid arousing Chang Pin’s suspicions. Mu Kuangda listened attentively and nodded on occasion. Chang Pin, on the other hand, shucked a crab and ate while Duan Ling talked, his eyes focused on the puppet play instead of the boy. After Duan Ling finished his report, Wu Du added a few more details, matters relating to the organization of Tong Pass’s garrison and the enemy’s strength.

When the tale was over, Mu Kuangda said, “Wu Du, you certainly have a knack for leading troops and guerilla warfare.”

“Maybe he learned it from General Zhao,” Changliu-jun put in from the side. “Not much good it’ll do him now.”

Mu Qing snorted. Duan Ling glanced at Wu Du, but he merely answered Changliu-jun’s provocation with a humble nod. “Better than learning nothing after following an expert for years. Much obliged,” he said.

Now it was Duan Ling’s turn to hold back a snort.

Wu Du handed Duan Ling another crab shell piled with meat and tomalley while saying to Mu Kuangda, “The imperial exams are coming up. I didn’t want to delay Shan-er, so we hurried back.”

“You’re a family man now, I see,” Mu Kuangda replied. “The crown prince certainly holds you in high regard. You must consider his offer carefully.”

Wu Du fell silent.

“Speaking of which,” Chang Pin interjected. “The prime minister’s residence is about to prepare recommendation letters for the grace exam due to take place in the spring. Given the prime minister’s status, those he recommends will be exempted from the provincial exam—and based on the quality of Wang Shan’s essays, he certainly doesn’t need another three years. He can proceed to the metropolitan exam directly. Therefore, the only thing remaining is his background.” At this point, a hint of curiosity crept

into his voice. “If you don’t mind, Mister Wu, we’ll need some details from you so we can fill out the application on his behalf.”

Duan Ling’s stomach dropped—he hadn’t expected this maneuver. Whether Chang Pin was truly suspicious of his identity he didn’t know, but the man certainly intended to probe him.

Yet Wu Du was already prepared with a countermeasure. Turning to Duan Ling, he asked conversationally, “What’s your dad’s given name again? I used to always just call him Dage.”

“Wang Sheng,” Duan Ling replied.

“Wang Sheng,” Wu Du repeated with a sigh. “Wang Shan lost his mother when he was young. His father was an herb merchant with a little skill in medicine who saw some patients here and there. I met him in Xunbei, where he sourced some rare herbs for me. Wang Shan traveled with his father since he was a child; it makes sense he’s seen more than your average youth. His father expressed his wish to entrust him to me on several occasions, hoping to spare his son all the moving around, but I was making my living under someone else’s roof at the time and could scarcely take care of myself, much less someone else.”

Listening to Wu Du extemporize stirred Duan Ling’s memories of his real father. Although the tale was fiction, some details aligned with the truth. Hearing it filled Duan Ling with mixed emotions.

“One who practices medicine to relieve the suffering of others accumulates virtue and brings prosperity to his descendants,” Chang Pin said. “Your father must have been a good man.”

Duan Ling nodded. Wu Du chuckled and reached out, patting him on the shoulder. When he was done, he let his hand slip down and capture Duan Ling’s, rubbing his fingers encouragingly. Warmth filled Duan Ling. This wasn’t part of the act—Wu Du was genuinely trying to comfort him.

“This kid has been likeable since he was young,” Wu Du said to the others. “From soldiers to blacksmiths, to shamans and tailors and actors—whatever the caste, they would teach him their skills out of gratitude to his father. As for how much he actually learned, I have no clue. The Four Pillars of Destiny[2] divined at his birth foretell a robust fate that’s excellent for achievements, though apparently not so good for marriage. Wang-dage

asked me to take him back then, and told me to care for him however I could."

"That should do," Mu Kuangda said. He turned to Chang Pin. "For Wang Shan's application, state that he comes from the Wang family of merchant physicians in Xunbei. Medicine is a proper profession. The rest need not be elaborated on."

Chang Pin smiled again. "I suppose that although your skills aren't adequate to heal the human body, it's not such a bad thing to refocus your energies on healing society instead."

This was such generous praise that Duan Ling promptly thanked Chang Pin and Mu Kuangda.

Mu Kuangda poured a cup of yellow wine and personally handed it to Wu Du. "Have some," he said. "It will nullify the unhealthy cooling effects of the crab meat. You're wounded; take some time to recuperate. I'll have work for you once you have made your decision."

Wu Du knew the crown prince must've requested his service from Mu Kuangda. Naturally, the prime minister would prefer he join the Eastern Palace—the opportunity aligned with the Mu family's interests. If Wu Du agreed to become an informant for Mu Kuangda, he would gain an ear within the palace and be able to influence the crown prince's movements. Having an agent like Wu Du—a poisons expert—in place would be especially beneficial.

Yet another thought occurred to Duan Ling: The crown prince had already attempted to recruit Wu Du once. If he really believed in Wu Du's loyalty, leaving him in the prime minister's residence as a member of Mu Kuangda's retinue would offer him much more leverage. So why the change of heart?

"I can't drink anymore," Wu Du said with a wave of his hand. "This wine's too strong."

Wu Du casually handed the half-drunk cup to Duan Ling, who downed the rest. As the night wore on, Mu Kuangda and Chang Pin still had more matters to discuss among themselves, and Wu Du and Duan Ling took their leave.

The pair walked down the outside corridor and exited the main manor. Wu Du pointed up. “Look.”

Above the narrow alleyway, the Milky Way streamed across the vault of the sky. Both stopped in their tracks, stricken by memories of that Qixi night in Tong Pass.

“I can’t believe I forgot to give you a proper birthday,” Wu Du said. “I was so busy fighting it slipped my mind.”

“My birthday is actually in the twelfth month,” Duan Ling said quietly. “Let’s celebrate it then.”

When they returned to their room, both stumbling a bit from the wine, Wu Du collapsed onto the bed. He gazed blearily at Duan Ling, who couldn’t be bothered to wash up and simply lay down next to him.

“Do you want to join the Eastern Palace?” Duan Ling asked.

Wu Du was quiet a moment. “Maybe I’ll be able to dig up some evidence against Wuluohou Mu and the crown prince.”

“I’d rather you stay with me,” Duan Ling said. “I don’t want to be parted from you.”

“Then I won’t go.”

Wu Du patted him gently on the shoulder, then rolled onto his side to face Duan Ling, their eyes locking.

“There’s still some time,” Duan Ling said. “Prime Minister Mu won’t ask for your decision again until after the imperial exams.”

Wu Du wrinkled his brow. “How do you know?”

“He needs to ensure your loyalty to him, so he’ll keep me in his residence as a method of keeping you in check.”

Understanding dawned on Wu Du. Now that he thought about it, that seemed entirely plausible. Mu Kuangda wasn’t blind; he saw they’d grown close. In exchange for his support in advancing Duan Ling’s future—taking him formally as a student and sponsoring him in the imperial exams—Wu Du would need to become his undercover agent as a guest advisor to the crown prince.

“What I still can’t figure out is why the crown prince is so anxious to recruit you,” Duan Ling said. “It’s too different from his previous attitude.” Still tipsy, he laid a hand on Wu Du’s cheek.

Wu Du stopped listening. Intoxicated, all he could see was Duan Ling. The deep pools of his eyes were bright, as if they reflected the twinkling stars.

“Duan Ling,” he whispered.

“Hm?”

In that moment, a feeling washed over Duan Ling—that having someone like Wu Du by his side forever would be a wonderful thing. Wu Du had told Mu Kuangda at the banquet that Duan Ling wasn’t suitable for marriage, but the truth was, Duan Ling didn’t even want to start a family. His many secrets would bring any wife or child nothing but danger.

“You’ll be the emperor someday,” Wu Du said, as if sensing his thoughts. “Don’t take what I told Prime Minister Mu seriously. You’ll marry a beautiful consort who will become your empress. You’ll have sons, grandsons…”

“I won’t marry,” Duan Ling said.

“…but you have to remember me,” Wu Du rambled drunkenly, unhearing. “Remember tonight, when you and I lay together in the same bed in the prime minister’s residence…”

“I won’t,” Duan Ling insisted.

His eyes were dreadfully heavy, threatening to close. But as he began to drift off, another hazy idea surfaced in his mind: Perhaps the crown prince had realized he wasn’t as safe as he’d once believed, and suspected Mu Kuangda might attempt to poison him. *Serves him right*, Duan Ling thought; he deserved to live in fear.

Then he remembered his father’s words—that many people would come, one after another, to give their all for him. But Duan Ling had always been adamant that if someone were to really give him their all, he would respond in kind…

He fell asleep in Wu Du’s arms.

Wu Du let his eyes drift closed and lowered his head. With the faint sweetness of osmanthus wine lingering on his lips, he pressed a gentle kiss to the tip of Duan Ling’s nose.

Chapter 94

WHEN DUAN LING woke the next morning, Wu Du was staring absently at a bowl of plain congee in front of him, waiting for Duan Ling to get up.

"You have to go back to your studies today," he said, holding up his bowl.

Duan Ling found himself oddly nervous about returning. It was as if he were in Shangjing again, with Li Jianhong telling him: *Son, it's time to go back to school today.*

Whenever it came time for school to resume, he'd always wanted his father to come with him—how wonderful it would have been if they'd never parted. Returning to Biyong Academy had been like walking into a prison.

And now, would Lang Junxia try to kill him again? He might not have the free time to spare, but perhaps he'd already told Cai Yan that Duan Ling was still alive.

"Then—what will you do while I'm gone?" Duan Ling asked.

"I'll guard you and keep you safe. Don't be afraid."

"I should be all right," said Duan Ling. "Changliu-jun is usually around wherever Mu Qing is, so I think that person…wouldn't dare attempt anything."

Wu Du eyed him.

"You're still injured," Duan Ling continued. "So take it easy."

"My foot's almost healed, and I can hold a sword in my right hand."

Wu Du…couldn't possibly be thinking of crouching on the roof beams the whole time he was in lessons, could he? How tiring it would be to torture himself like that every day. But Duan Ling couldn't exactly order him around as the crown prince either; he would surely get angry.

“I’m only going to lie around sleeping anyway if I stay at home,” Wu Du said. “Hurry, finish your breakfast and we’ll go. Stop fussing.”

Duan Ling sighed, resigned. “Well, don’t start any fights if you run into Changliu-jun.”

“Obviously I won’t act like *him*.”

Duan Ling had intended to tidy up after breakfast, but Wu Du wouldn’t hear of it and shuffled him out the door. Duan Ling had no choice but to walk through the gates with his books in his arms. When he turned back, he saw Wu Du cleaning up their bowls and chopsticks. He didn’t allow servants to enter the courtyard, so he threw everything in a wooden basin and put it outside the gates to be collected.

“I’m leaving. Don’t follow me,” Duan Ling told him.

Wu Du waved a hand, shooing him off.

Duan Ling turned corner after corner navigating the prime minister’s new manor, a much larger residence than the one in Xichuan. By the time he arrived at the study, Mu Qing and the tutor were waiting for him. Issuing a hurried apology, Duan Ling settled across from Mu Qing, just as he had before. A few moments later, Changliu-jun walked in unannounced, dragged another table over beside Mu Qing, and sat cross-legged before it.

“What are you doing here?” Mu Qing asked.

“I’m here to study with you,” Changliu-jun said. Though his mask obscured his expression, he sounded miffed.

Duan Ling cast him a curious glance. When he saw Changliu-jun holding a copy of the *Thousand Character Classic*, he remembered Mu Kuangda saying Changliu-jun couldn’t read and nearly sprayed a mouthful of tea over the table. *Don’t tell me Wu Du touched a nerve yesterday and he decided to become an assassin who can read?*

“Do you remember what you read before?” the tutor asked Duan Ling. “Recite it again.”

“Yes, sir.” Duan Ling had an excellent memory; he opened up *Great Learning*, which they’d studied in Xichuan together, and recited three chapters.

The tutor nodded in satisfaction and moved on to his lesson on how to properly analyze this text.

“You’ve had quite a few days of leisure as the capital moved,” he said, turning to Mu Qing. “But now it is time to rein in that frivolousness and refocus your efforts. Wang Shan is back now. If you continue to goof off, don’t blame me for striking your palm.”

Only then did Duan Ling realize Mu Qing had seldom studied after the move of the capital. He immediately felt an oncoming migraine.

“Yellow,” he helpfully pointed out for Changliu-jun, seated next to him. “From ‘the heaven was black and the earth was yellow.’”

Changliu-jun nodded curtly, not daring to make a sound.

“Wang Shan,” the tutor said a moment later. “Why do you keep staring at the ceiling?”

“No reason. My neck’s just sore from sleeping in a bad position.”

Duan Ling had been searching for Wu Du’s shadow on the roof beams but found nothing. Changliu-jun was there, so theoretically he didn’t need to come. Yet they had barely begun their class when the sound of wooden clogs clacked closer in the corridor outside.

“Who built this place?” Wu Du demanded from the doorway. “So many twists and turns! Won’t His Excellency get lost inside his own manor?!”

Under the staring eyes of everyone in the study, Wu Du slipped out of his clogs, bent to set them aside, and entered barefoot. He saluted the tutor, then hauled another table over and took a seat beside Duan Ling. Everyone was stunned silent.

Finally, Mu Qing commented, “So you’re here too.”

“I’m here to study with him,” Wu Du announced. “Everyone has the right to an education, regardless of background—isn’t that how the saying goes, sir?”

“Everyone has the right to an education, regardless of background,” affirmed the tutor. “Now—no fighting in the classroom.”

Duan Ling hadn’t expected Wu Du’s so-called protection to be so blatantly out in the open. He snickered behind his hand. Wu Du pointed him back to his ink and paper, silently admonishing him to focus on his studies. Glancing around the room, his eye caught on the *Thousand Character Classic* in Changliu-jun’s hands.

“Changliu-jun, you don’t know how to read?” he blurted in astonishment.

Again, the room went deathly still.

“He’s reviewing,” Mu Qing explained hastily.

“Reviewing and deepening one’s understanding is what makes a true master,” Duan Ling offered, quoting *The Analects*.

Changliu-jun didn’t know what to say.

Wu Du, with a tentative nod, asked no more questions. Changliu-jun was trying so hard to figure out what he was looking at that he sweated profusely, but he didn’t dare sound the words out aloud. Once the tutor instructed Duan Ling and Mu Qing to begin their essays, he left the study.

Duan Ling and Mu Qing immediately slouched in their seats. Hungover from the night before, Mu Qing slumped forward onto the desk, nodding off. Duan Ling leaned lazily on the upturned edge of the table, one of his legs propped against Wu Du’s thigh. Bright autumn sun filtered through the window, making the whole room pleasantly warm. Life was simply perfect at this moment. Duan Ling even found meaning in studying; he was no longer lonely.

Blinking awake, Mu Qing looked enviously at Duan Ling cozied up to Wu Du. “Wang Shan, come here—I have something to tell you. Help me with my schoolwork.”

“It’s not even noon,” Wu Du cut in just as Duan Ling was about to rise. “What are you two doing?”

With no choice but to behave himself, Mu Qing could only stay put and fidget in his seat until the tutor came back and read the essays they’d written. Only once the bell tolled outside did the tutor release them for lunch. The four of them sat in a row on the wooden railing in the corridor, holding their lunch boxes and chatting as they ate. Halfway through the break, Mu Qing and Changliu-jun were called away, leaving Duan Ling and Wu Du alone.

“Where do you think they’re going?” Duan Ling asked.

“To greet a guest. Where else?” said Wu Du. “And to eat good food. Do you want any?”

Duan Ling flapped a dismissive hand.

The autumn breeze was especially pleasant in the afternoon, rustling through the leaves and jingling the wind chimes as sunbeams angled into the corridor. Unlike Xichuan, where it was dark and gloomy year-round, Jiang Prefectural City had four distinct seasons, each with its own charms.

Noticing Duan Ling’s drowsiness, Wu Du offered a shoulder for him to rest on and the two lay their heads together, catching a nap in the corridor. When Duan Ling woke, rubbing sleep from his eyes, Mu Qing still hadn’t returned—so Wu Du gave him sword lessons in the courtyard using wooden rulers instead. He faced Duan Ling, standing straight and tall with one hand tucked behind his back, and demonstrated the motions from a few feet away.

“You’re lifting your shoulder too high,” Wu Du said. “The key to the Mountain Splitting technique is not the shoulder but the arm. If you lift your shoulder, your opponent will lop your arm right off.”

Duan Ling did as instructed, hacking down sharply. Wu Du whirled away, and Duan Ling teetered as he lost his balance. With a laugh, Wu Du caught him by the waist and tilted him back to steadiness.

“Again,” Wu Du told him. “And when my foot heals, I’ll teach you how to use qinggong to jump up the walls.”

When Mu Qing at last returned, he tossed Duan Ling an item. “For you.”

It was a red coral bead bracelet. With one glance, Duan Ling knew it must’ve come from the Mongols; the Mu Family had never possessed such a thing before. “Where’d you get it?”

“Dad gave one to me. He said to give you one too. Are you practicing how to use a sword? Can I learn?”

Mu Qing had just given Duan Ling a gift, and it would be discourteous to accept without offering anything in return—thus Wu Du taught him a few moves as well. He and Duan Ling practiced in turns while Changliu-jun stood off to the side and observed.

After watching a while, he exclaimed, incredulous: “You’re teaching them the Mountain and River Sword Style?!”

“The hell does it have to do with you?” said Wu Du.

Duan Ling was at a loss for words.

As the sole remaining member of the White Tiger Sect, it went without saying that Wu Du called the shots—he could teach the technique to whomever he pleased. Unable to argue back, Changliu-jun stood aside and watched. After a while, he asked, “Have you found the cultivation method?”

“No.”

“No cultivation method?” Changliu-jun snorted. “‘Practice’ my ass.”

“Go read your books,” Wu Du snapped back. “Why are you so annoying?”

Changliu-jun glowered in silence.

From that day onward, Wu Du and Changliu-jun joined the ranks of students as Duan Ling and Mu Qing’s deskmates. While Changliu-jun was sometimes absent, off accompanying Mu Kuangda, Wu Du attended every day.

As the weeks flew by, the air became cooler. Shortly after the braziers began to be lit in the study, the first winter snowfall came drifting down, and they all felt snug and sleepy holed up in their lessons during the day. Wu Du's body radiated warmth like a heater, ideal for keeping both Duan Ling's hands and feet cozy. The pair seemed to become more inseparable by the day, so much so that Mu Qing burned with jealousy at the sight of them.

The snow in Jiang Prefectural City fell in thick, cottony drifts of pure white. Carried by the wind, it blanketed the trees and shrubs in a delicate veil. On that day, as soon as Wu Du arrived in the classroom, he was summoned away again by Mu Kuangda. Duan Ling and Mu Qing were left sitting on opposite sides of the brazier, basking in the warmth as they laughed and joked. Barely a few minutes had passed before Wu Du returned in a hurry.

"I'm going to the palace," he told Duan Ling without even stepping through the door.

"Did something happen?" Duan Ling asked.

"Not sure," said Wu Du. "Word has it a foreign envoy has arrived, and His Majesty has personally summoned me to the palace to meet them."

"Okay," said Duan Ling. "Then you should go. Should I wait for you for dinner tonight?"

"There'll probably be a royal banquet," said Wu Du. "But I'll be back for sure later tonight. Be…" He trailed off.

Duan Ling knew Wu Du meant to tell him *be careful*, and he nodded. Since they'd come to Jiang Prefectural City three months ago, Lang Junxia hadn't once made an attempt on his life; neither had the crown prince made any moves. Perhaps they'd changed their minds about killing him. Duan Ling often found himself letting his guard down. So he understood Wu Du's warning: He needed to consciously remind himself to be cautious at all times.

"Shan," Mu Qing called when Wu Du had gone, snapping him out of his reverie. "Let's get studying. We'll be sitting the exams in the first month."

Mu Qing always addressed him this way. The feeling this produced in Duan Ling was strange—though he only called him by his name with no

friendly diminutives, the address still felt a little too familiar.

"Wu Du is super crafty," Mu Qing went on in a grave tone. "Don't tell me you've fallen for his lies."

"Huh?" As soon as Duan Ling heard Wu Du's name and *lie* in the same sentence, he tensed, and his stomach began to hurt.

"Anyway, that's what Chang Pin said," Mu Qing continued. "So don't believe everything he says, or do everything he tells you to."

"No, no," Duan Ling insisted. "He wouldn't lie to me."

If Wu Du truly had ulterior motives, Duan Ling would already be dead in a grave, never mind sitting here chatting with Mu Qing.

Mu Qing fell silent, sullenly flipping a page in his book. Duan Ling found this curious. He knew Mu Qing was genuinely looking out for him, but he was determined to remain heartless. If he ever returned to the court and took his rightful place as the crown prince, the Mu clan was sure to become his enemy—after all, he knew far too many of Mu Kuangda's secrets. Yet from another perspective, he owed the Mu family a debt for all they'd done for him. Thus he kept Mu Qing always at arm's length, hoping to maintain enough space to maneuver. Apart from their schooling and exams, he was careful not to allow Mu Qing any opportunity to get closer to him, lest one day—when the time came to collect on that debt of emotion—the result should be that much more painful.

Even so, Duan Ling had a keen sense that since Chang Pin had been the one to say such a thing, it was more than just a comment made in passing. There had to be some deeper meaning behind his words.

"Why did Chang Pin say that?" he asked.

Chapter 95

UPON REFLECTION, Mu Qing really was the person in the world Duan Ling felt the guiltiest about. He'd bared his heart to every friend he'd made thus far, and they to him; it was only with Mu Qing that he'd kept his guard up. If they'd met earlier, perhaps when Duan Ling was ten, they surely would've become fast friends.

"Mister Chang Pin said Wu Du only told them your Four Pillars of Destiny are incompatible with marriage because he wants to keep you by his side and not let anyone steal you away. You knew, too, right? That there's no such thing as having Four Pillars of Destiny that are totally incompatible with marriage?"

How sharp Mister Chang Pin's eyes must have been to catch the flash of surprise on Duan Ling's face that night—only because he had truly been caught off guard by what Wu Du had said. But when Duan Ling had mulled over the conversation afterward, he'd ultimately come to the conclusion that Wu Du had lied about his marriage incompatibility to protect him. If the Mu family tried to arrange a marriage for him, there would be no end to his troubles. And who could be sure Mu Kuangda didn't happen to have an illegitimate daughter or two around?

What was more, this was only what Mu Qing had heard to report back to him. There must've been more to it as-yet unrelayed; Chang Pin wouldn't be discussing Duan Ling's marriage prospects for no reason. He'd likely been in talks with Mu Kuangda already, and only when he casually questioned Mu Qing about Duan Ling did Mu Qing hear those words.

"Even if it's not true," Duan Ling said with a smile, "what does it matter if I stay with Wu Du?"

His words came from the heart: No matter what path he walked, he was determined never to part with Wu Du. He didn't want to be alone like his father had been—a man who, the more he thought about it, the more he found to be stronger than humanly possible.

Sometimes, Duan Ling even understood Cai Yan. Though they had yet to see each other since he returned to Jiang Prefectural City, he knew Cai Yan's fear and anxiety were far greater than his own. His solitary light of hope right now must be Lang Junxia.

Mu Qing had been convinced Wu Du was using Duan Ling's gratitude to tie him down, and so he passionately protested the injustice being done to him—but once Duan Ling insisted this wasn't the case, he stopped badmouthing Wu Du. He merely said with a nod, "I guess as long as it makes you happy."

An image came into focus in Duan Ling's mind, and he burst into laughter: Mu Qing, hearing the conversation between his father and Chang Pin and huffily insisting he would warn Duan Ling off Wu Du; Mu Kuangda, telling him it would be no use; Mu Qing, not believing him and telling Duan Ling anyway… And sure enough, the result was just as his father predicted.

Mu Kuangda always described himself as a tactful man. Duan Ling understood him clearly in that respect. It was too bad Mu Kuangda's own son was less tactful in comparison. Sometimes Duan Ling felt as if he was more like Mu Kuangda's son, whereas Mu Qing's earnest thoughts seemed in line with those of his own father, Li Jianhong. Maybe if the two of them switched fathers, everything would make sense.

"What's so funny?" Mu Qing asked.

"You've grown up," Duan Ling said.

"You sound so *old*."

"I missed you a lot when I was at Tong Pass."

"Dad was busy moving the capital," Mu Qing said, smiling again. "I was bored to death. I waited for you to come back every day."

In truth, Duan Ling had barely thought of Mu Qing while in Tong Pass, but he'd said those words to make him happy. There were only two people who sincerely treated him well without knowing his identity. Wu Du was one; Mu Qing was the other. But a world of difference existed between the two of them. As snowflakes drifted languidly by on the wind outside, Duan Ling and Mu Qing sat across the brazier from one another, neither eager to resume their studies.

Duan Ling tossed his book aside. “I’ll take you out and we’ll have some fun. Where d’you want to go?”

Mu Qing had never expected that Duan Ling, such a serious student, would be the one to suggest skipping out on their homework. “Let’s go!” he exclaimed, eyes lighting up. “I’ll show you a place!”

Seizing the chance, they stole away for a break. The manor at this moment, it happened, was nearly empty. Duan Ling snatched up his school things and stopped by his courtyard for a change of clothes. When he met back up with Mu Qing, the two strolled out of the manor and met a carriage that awaited them at the end of the alley.

“Where are we going?” Duan Ling asked.

“You’ll see when we get there,” said Mu Qing, rummaging through a pouch hanging from his sash. He fished out a token and tucked it into his palm, then took Duan Ling’s hand and placed a small hand warmer in it.

After they rode a while, a guard stopped them for a search. He called into the carriage, “Who’s there?”

Duan Ling leaned forward to respond, but Mu Qing gestured for him to stay silent. He twitched the curtain aside and stuck his hand out to present the token to the guard.

“It’s me, from the Mu family.”

“The young master of the Mu family,” the guard said. “Are you traveling alone?”

“I’m here to find my father.”

The guard returned the token and waved the carriage through. *Are we going into the Grand Secretariat?* Duan Ling wondered. *Where Mu Kuangda works?* He’d always wanted to tour the place.

Mu Qing held a hand up for him to be silent through several more rounds of questioning. After a series of twists and turns, the carriage rolled to a stop.

“All right, let’s go!” Mu Qing said.

It was a sunny afternoon. Though a light sprinkling of snow still drifted from the sky, the grounds glistened with snowmelt. Duan Ling found

himself stepping into what seemed to be an inner courtyard, its walls over ten feet tall.

“Where are we?”

Mu Qing said nothing, leading him by the hand through another entrance. *Is this what the Grand Secretariat looks like?* Duan Ling wondered again. But the further inside they went, the more he sensed that his initial assumption was wrong. As they strode down an open-air corridor through the garden, it struck him.

“The imperial palace?” Duan Ling exclaimed.

Mu Qing snickered. He’d obviously brought Duan Ling here to show him something grand out in the real world, so Duan Ling’s shocked reaction gave him a swollen head. He had no clue this supposedly novel location was, in fact, Duan Ling’s own house.

Duan Ling’s thoughts began racing. *Please, oh please don’t let me run into Cai Yan right now*. But then again—so what if he did? Would Cai Yan really be so brazen as to kill someone inside the imperial palace? Nervous as he was, considering the situation in this light added a thrill of excitement to the prospect.

“Shoot,” Mu Qing said, seeming lost. “I forgot we’re not in Xichuan anymore. Why’s the royal palace in Jiang Prefectural City so big? You can’t even find anything. How do we get to the empress’s palace?”

“Calm down. We can just ask someone for directions,” Duan Ling said.

They spotted several imperial guards standing at attention under the eaves, with a soldier who seemed to be their commander giving them orders. Duan Ling stepped forward to ask for directions, but as soon as the commander turned, Mu Qing’s face drained of color.

“Don’t go!” he whispered, waving his hands frantically at Duan Ling.

Duan Ling looked back at him in confusion—but it was too late. He’d already wandered into the man’s field of vision, and the commander had taken notice of him in turn.

Standing slightly short of six feet, the man had thick eyebrows and clear, dark eyes; he wore a suit of black armor and had a plain, three-section

staff of black iron strapped to his back. Duan Ling, on the other hand, was draped in a heavy fur coat and wore the bracelet of red coral beads Mu Qing had given him on his wrist. He hadn't taken the time to make himself presentable before leaving the prime minister's residence; his hair had been left loose, only half fastened up.

The commander froze at the sight of him, staring in disbelief, as if plunged into a dream.

Duan Ling faltered.

The man still seemed dazed, so Duan Ling waved a hand tentatively.

The man furrowed his brow. "You are…"

A flurry of snow drifted down between them. Duan Ling smiled faintly, straightening his posture as he held his hands out and cupped them in a proper salute.

In a flash, time turned on its head, and the snowflakes adrift in the sky were drawn back in a rush toward the ends of the horizon. The dead leaves in the imperial palace flew off the ground back onto the stems of the trees. Time flowed backward: The flowers wilted and then bloomed; leaves turned from yellow to green. Countless scenes played in reverse, until time slowed once again before a scene in Ningxia, on the south shore of the Yellow River all those years ago.

I live by the north shore, and you by the south; how I wish to send letters where the geese do not fly.

We viewed peach and plum blooms in the spring wind with a cup of wine; I wait for ten years by my lamp on rainy jianghu nights.[3]

"Sir, my name is Wang Shan." Duan Ling introduced himself. "May I ask which palace belongs to the empress?"

At the sound of his voice, Xie You finally returned to the present. Mu Qing jogged up behind Duan Ling. "General Xie, I've come to…look for my aunt," he said with an awkward smile.

"Greetings, General Xie," Duan Ling said hurriedly, making up for his lack of courtesy.

Xie You seemed distracted, drifting away again until a lone snowflake glided under the veranda and stuck on Duan Ling's eyebrow.

Duan Ling wasn’t sure what to do; flustered, he knit his brows tightly. Xie You slowly lifted a finger and pointed toward the end of the corridor.

Mu Qing and Duan Ling quickly cupped their hands in thanks.

“Thank you, General Xie,” said Mu Qing.

“Thank you, General Xie,” Duan Ling echoed.

Mu Qing pulled Duan Ling down the corridor in a rush, leaving Xie You standing stock-still, his head spinning and his heart feeling as if it had been struck with a hammer.

“That was Xie You,” Mu Qing whispered to Duan Ling. “He commands a great army. He’s the top general of Jiang Prefecture, and the Defender-General of the State.”

Duan Ling was astonished. *Did he recognize me? No, he couldn’t have.* Even Wu Du and Mu Kuangda hadn’t recognized him—so how could Xie You? His strong resemblance to his mother and lack of resemblance to his father had unexpectedly become a form of protection.

“He’s scary,” Duan Ling said. “Just now, he was looking at me like he wanted to kill me.”

“He’s like that with everyone.” Mu Qing still remembered his own first impression of Xie You a year ago, when his father had brought him to Li Jianhong and offered him up as Li Jianhong’s disciple. Xie You’s commanding presence on that rainy night was carved deeply into his memory.

They arrived at Changqiu Palace, the residence of the empress. Mu Jinzhi was not there, but the head palace maid she’d left behind recognized Mu Qing.

“Goodness.” She laughed. “How come you came here all by yourself?”

“Where’s Auntie?” asked Mu Qing.

“Her Majesty is in the gardens with His Majesty,” replied the maid.

Realizing they were underdressed, Mu Qing requested she fetch a spare set of robes from the palace for both him and Duan Ling. As they changed their clothes, Duan Ling recalled that the empress Mu Jinzhi was

indeed Mu Qing's paternal aunt. If he and Mu Qing went to the gardens in search of her, they would almost certainly run into Li Yanqiu. His heart pounded madly at the thought—what if Cai Yan and Lang Junxia were there as well? What kind of scenario might he be walking into?

Wu Du was also somewhere in the imperial palace. Would he be there too?

"Maybe I should…" Duan Ling wavered. "…not show myself after all. I'll just watch from a distance. You're breaking the rules by sneaking me into the palace."

"Don't worry," Mu Qing assured him. "The empress is my aunt, and the emperor is my uncle-in-law. What's there to be frightened of?"

"Even so," insisted Duan Ling. "I'm still a little scared."

Not even just a little, in fact. Rushing out to meet Li Yanqiu like this, without careful forethought, could result in things spiraling quickly and completely out of his control. Duan Ling insisted again on staying back.

"Fine," Mu Qing relented. "We'll just sneak a peek from afar. If I show up, they'll have a million questions for me anyway."

It had stopped snowing by the time they reached the garden, and the imperial palace glistened as if carved of jade. When Duan Ling peeked into the garden, he froze at the sight before him: Several tables had been placed inside a large gazebo. A man sat at the central table facing the garden, where a small crowd gathered around a cleared-out space.

"His Majesty is the one in the middle," Mu Qing explained as he pulled Duan Ling behind a pillar.

Naturally, then, the woman seated next to the emperor had to be the empress, Mu Jinzhi. On Li Yanqiu's left sat a young man with an attendant hovering behind him. Further down, Mu Kuangda and two more ministers sat on the left side; on the right, in the guest seat across from him, sat an envoy dressed in Mongolian garb.

"The Mongols came?" Duan Ling asked, thinking of the coral beads on his wrist. He'd been right about them.

"Today is the sixth day of the twelfth month, the crown prince's birthday," the head palace maid explained. "The Mongols sent an envoy

with gifts to congratulate him.”

Duan Ling nodded. His eyes flicked to the four men standing in the cleared-out space in utter silence: Changliu-jun, Lang Junxia, Zheng Yan, and Wu Du. He recognized Wu Du in an instant. His arms were folded over his chest, and his patience seemed to be wearing thin as he watched the two Mongols before him putting on a wrestling performance for the crown prince.

As Duan Ling watched, he couldn’t help but think back to his days at Ming Academy, when Batu had taught him how to wrestle. In a way, this wasn’t the first time the Mongols had paid their respects to the prince of Southern Chen.

Chapter 96

NEXT TO THE WRESTLERS stood a brawny man even taller than Changliu-jun, who—despite the freezing cold—was shirtless. His expression as he eyed Lang Junxia and the other assassins standing across from him was disdainful; he had a broad face creased with deep frown lines.

“Spectacular!” Cai Yan exclaimed, first to clap when one of the wrestlers flipped the other to the ground. The officials nodded approvingly, Mu Kuangda among them.

The Mongol envoy gave Cai Yan a nod, and Cai Yan granted a cup of wine to the winner, who stepped forward and thanked him.

“After waiting for such a long time, I finally get the chance to see Your Majesty and Highness’s faces,” the envoy said. “Now I have something to brag to my tribe about when I return home.”

“All of you have come from afar to celebrate our son’s birthday. We are very happy for that,” Li Yanqiu replied. “We were still busy settling into the new capital before, and so we could not receive you in good time.”

Duan Ling and Mu Qing silently left the corridor and stepped down into the lush garden filled with flowers and trees. Before Mu Qing could venture farther out, Duan Ling tugged his sleeve, signaling that they should stay where they were. The Black-Plated guards standing around the perimeter were about to chase them off when Xie You, approaching from the other end of the corridor, gestured for them to stand down.

Given tacit leave, Duan Ling and Mu Qing cheekily hid behind the bushes and listened in on the conversation. From this particular spot, Duan Ling could see Wu Du zoning out about ten steps away.

“I read the letter you delivered,” Cai Yan told the envoy. “But I fear I was too busy seeing to the affairs of the country to write a reply. Since Father has already issued an oral decree, I’ll have you bring my reply along with it.”

“Excellent,” the envoy replied. “My prince has given me orders to deliver his congratulatory message to the crown prince on his birthday at all costs, and to request a letter of reply.”

“What congratulatory message?” Cai Yan said with a laugh. “To think Batu still misses me.”

“My prince says that, though separated by thousands of miles, he still gazes at you from our country in the far north,” the envoy replied seriously. “Today he celebrates the crown prince’s birthday in honor of your friendship as schoolmates at Ming Academy.”

A warm smile came over Cai Yan’s face; he shook his head and sighed fondly.

“The prince has also ordered our party to present a dish he specifically prepared for Your Highness. He calls it ‘Cai dog.’”

Cai Yan’s smile froze.

“I thought your people didn’t eat dog meat?” asked one of the ministers.

To the baffled members of the Chen court, the envoy’s words seemed nonsensical. The man, however, simply smiled, eyes fixed on Cai Yan’s face. “You’re right. We don’t eat dog meat. Dogs are our loyal companions, so in honor of their usefulness to us, we knead vegetable stock into our dough and use it to bake bread in the shape of a dog, which we give to our peasants in exchange for good luck.”

Batu must have taught the envoy to say those exact words. Duan Ling wondered what Cai Yan’s face looked like at that moment. As they said, paper could not contain a fire; certain things were bound to show through. Duan Ling found the words amusing. At the same time, he felt Batu’s anger rushing for Cai Yan from thousands of miles away. If he wasn’t furious, he wouldn’t have instructed the envoy to pass on such malicious words. But whether his message was meant as a taunt or a true threat… That, Duan Ling didn’t know.

“Please present the dish,” the envoy said, raising his hand.

Servants carried up two platters, each bearing a strikingly colored flatbread molded in the shape of a dog, and set them down in front of Cai

Yan. The blood drained from Cai Yan's face, leaving him pale and ashen. "How considerate," he choked out.

Everyone else found the gesture quaint. Within the garden party, only Lang Junxia knew Cai Yan's old nickname, and so only he knew the true nature of Batu's gift—though Wu Du could make a good guess. Lang Junxia turned his head, casting him a meaningful glance. Wu Du ignored him and instead stared into the bushes straight ahead, whereupon he caught a glimpse of Duan Ling peeking out.

"What interesting customs the Mongols have," Cai Yan said to Li Yanqiu. "Borjigin was always so very friendly back in Shangjing."

Li Yanqiu nodded.

"My prince sincerely requests His Highness write him a personal reply, in order to soothe his yearning heart," the envoy added.

The whole pavilion burst into laughter, thinking the barbarian attempting to speak Han had misused an expression of love.

Cai Yan sighed deeply. "Since he insists, bring me my ink and brush."

Lang Junxia stepped forward. "The cold weather is unsuitable for Your Highness's hands. There is no need to write the letter yourself; allow me to write it for you."

The envoy paused. Just as he drew breath to speak again, Lang Junxia turned to him. "It's been many years since we parted ways with your prince," he said. "I have also missed him. He must be eighteen now. Has he married?"

"My prince has been in the field fighting campaigns for the khan," the envoy replied. "He's the khan's most precious grandson, and thus a suitable match has not yet been discussed."

Lang Junxia saluted Li Yanqiu and Cai Yan before seating himself in the gazebo. Taking up the brush, he dipped it into the ink and began to record the casual pleasantries that rolled off Cai Yan's tongue: first fondly recalling the days they'd shared at Ming Academy, then shifting into good wishes for the friendly relations between their two nations.

Duan Ling's lips quirked as he eavesdropped from the bushes. Though he couldn't see the envoy's face from his vantage, he knew Batu must be aware of Cai Yan impersonating him—he just didn't know how he'd figured it out. When the letter was finished, the envoy passed on a few more of Batu's recollections from Ming Academy. He spoke of the headmaster, Helian Bo, and other boys, his words laced with hidden meaning, yet Cai Yan dodged the implications and responded flawlessly.

"My prince would also like to ask if Your Highness has seen Zongzhen," the envoy said.

"He almost took me along to Zhongjing to be his study companion," Cai Yan recalled, sounding wistful. He sighed. "But we are all at the whims of fate. If I had gone with him, perhaps Father would still be here, and everyone would still be alive."

As soon as he said those words, the entire party fell silent.

"Your Majesty?" Mu Jinzhi prompted delicately.

"Rong-er," Li Yanqiu said. "You mustn't dwell on this. How many times have I told you?"

"Of course," Cai Yan agreed dutifully.

Emotions churned in Duan Ling as he listened to the conversation in silence. He glanced up and caught Wu Du gazing back at him through the gap in the bushes, his eyes soft and tender.

"The prince also wishes to ask His Highness whether he fancies my prince or Yelü Zongzhen," the envoy said.

Once again, the audience was torn between laughter and tears, finding the question's phrasing humorous.

Cai Yan turned to Li Yanqiu. "I did not realize the Mongols were so frank."

"It seems Yelü Zongzhen and Borjigin often fight over your affections," Li Yanqiu joked. "Looks like you are quite well-loved."

"You exaggerate," Cai Yan hurriedly responded, then turned back to the envoy. "I am closer with your prince, of course."

Mu Kuangda’s face fell, and he coughed pointedly, but Cai Yan pretended not to hear and continued, “We truly do not know where Yuan’s national sword is, but if we ever do find it, we promise to return it to you. Wuluohou Mu, write this down in the letter as well.”

Lang Junxia completed the last stroke and handed the letter to Cai Yan, who took the seal his attendant presented to him and stamped it on the bottom left corner.

“Although the letter is not written in His Highness’s hand, I can at least take it back to fulfill my orders,” the envoy said with great cheer.

“Are there any other words Borjigin has for me?” Cai Yan asked.

The envoy fell silent. He seemed to hesitate, looking around the gazebo as if preparing to say something further. Duan Ling had the impression he had a few more tricks up his sleeve. Before he could show them, however, Li Yanqiu took charge.

“It is cold, and getting late,” he said to Cai Yan. “You should return to the Eastern Palace. Come to us later this evening; we shall talk more then.”

Cai Yan quickly murmured his assent. Li Yanqiu rose, and the entourage bowed as he and the empress left the garden. After seeing Li Yanqiu and Mu Jinzhi off, Cai Yan didn’t retake his seat but instead stood in place, casting a sidelong glance at the envoy. One of his new attendants, the man named Feng, stepped forward.

“Have you anything more to say?” he asked the envoy. “If not, His Highness will also take his leave.”

Li Yanqiu’s sudden departure seemed to have put a hitch in the envoy’s plans.

“If your prince has more to convey, you may speak to Prime Minister Mu, or the other ministers here,” Cai Yan added. “It’s all the same.”

The envoy cast a glance at the assassins standing outside the gazebo. “My prince requests another wrestling match with His Highness.”

“What?” A look of impatience crossed Cai Yan’s face; his hackles were raised again. Wary he’d fallen into another trap, he swept his eyes over the Mongol attendants. Perhaps Batu had disguised himself and followed his envoy there—it wasn’t outside the realm of possibility.

“Your prince is not here,” Cai Yan said skeptically, still scrutinizing the Mongols and bracing himself for Batu’s sudden appearance. “How can we wrestle?”

Luckily for him, the envoy simply smiled. “So Your Highness agrees?”

Cai Yan, you idiot, Duan Ling thought. *If Borjigin can run circles around you without even showing his face, is it Great Chen’s fortune or misfortune to have you as a ruler?*

Cai Yan’s thoughts were in chaos—anything he said now would give the envoy more to hold over him.

Fortunately, Mu Kuangda answered on his behalf. “Since your prince is not present, why don’t we each choose one of our own subordinates to wrestle a match in His Highness and your prince’s stead? Let us have some excitement, and we shall all return satisfied. No need for us to continue punishing ourselves standing outside in the dead of winter. Some of us are old, after all; we can’t compare to you youngsters who grew up in the north.”

“Your Excellency, that was precisely my intention,” the envoy said. “The greatest warrior of Yuan, Amugu, shall compete on behalf of my prince. Which brave warrior will Southern Chen send out to be his opponent?”

The ministers fell silent—what kind of joke was this, putting on a farce of a wrestling match with a brute? The idea alone was an insult.

Duan Ling could already guess the envoy’s next words: something along the lines of, *The great Chen Empire cannot produce even one man who dares compete with our warrior?* He knew Batu’s mind so well that he may as well have been living in his head.

“Which brave warrior will step forth?” the envoy repeated.

The longer this went on, the more panicked and agitated Cai Yan felt, and the likelier it was that he would somehow give the game away. He wanted nothing more than for the wrestling match to end so he could flee.

“Changliu-jun,” Mu Kuangda called.

Yet before Changliu-jun could answer, Wu Du took a quick step forward. “I shall test my skills against this great warrior of Yuan as His Highness’s champion,” he said.

Duan Ling’s heart leapt into his throat. Mu Qing was similarly stunned. He looked at Duan Ling with the words *Why is he such a show-off?* practically scrawled across his face. But Duan Ling knew that when Wu Du said *His Highness,* he wasn’t referring to Cai Yan, but to him. In Wu Du’s eyes, the true star of today’s celebratory tribute was Duan Ling—hiding in the bushes and never showing his face.

“Wu Du’s injuries have yet to heal,” Zheng Yan drawled. “Allow me.”

“No need to trouble my colleagues here,” Lang Junxia said with a nod in Cai Yan’s direction.

“How about this?” Cai Yan suggested, another thought occurring to him. “Seeing as Wu-qing has yet to recover, why don’t we—”

But Wu Du, ignoring everyone present, drew Flashblade, strapped to his side. The ringing of steel knocked the whole party silent.

“Wu Du!” Mu Kuangda cried in alarm.

At this act of provocation, the Mongol warrior’s eyes instantly hardened.

Chapter 97

"KHATANBAATAR," Wu Du called to the envoy, stepping up to the foot of the gazebo. "How about we exchange a few blows?"

Duan Ling's mouth fell open in shock. Before he could register what was happening, Wu Du and the envoy had already begun sizing each other up.

"Good eye!" the envoy praised him, his face breaking into a smile. "It's been a while since I had a match."

As it turned out, this envoy had once been the last disciple of Nayantuo, the foremost assassin of the Western Regions. When Li Jianhong had put his sword through his throat, ending his life, Nayantuo's Yulin Sword Sect had seen his death as a great humiliation. Yet for some reason, his final disciple—Khatanbaatar—had gone to Yuan afterward, and even served its khan as an envoy to Southern Chen.

Though all four renowned assassins had discerned that the envoy was skilled in martial arts, Changliu-jun had remained close to Mu Kuangda for years, and therefore knew little of jianghu affairs, while Zheng Yan spent most of his time in the south, seldom coming into contact with practitioners from the Western Regions. Lang Junxia, having been born in the Xianbei territories, was the only one who found this turn of events unsurprising. Wu Du, a member of the

White Tiger Sect since birth, had guessed the envoy's origins right away from the simple Hotan jade pendant hanging at his waist.

"Distinguished warrior, if you do not mind me asking," Khatanbaatar said, "what is your name?"

"I am nothing more than a nameless foot soldier of the late emperor," Wu Du replied.

"How did you know me?"

"Enough talk," Wu Du said. "Are we here to fight or to chitchat? Let's get it over with so I can go back and have dinner."

As the ministers laughed, Cai Yan counted his blessings that Wu Du was there to reveal the envoy's true identity. Otherwise, they really would've been hoodwinked like unwitting fools.

Khatanbaatar had given up his sword when he entered the imperial palace, and thus only had his bare fists. "As you wish. Since it's His Highness's birthday, we mustn't dirty the arena with blood; let us fight with wooden swords. After all, we'll have plenty of chances to face each other with steel in days to come."

Cai Yan ordered an attendant to fetch two wooden swords. The crowd shifted in their seats, leaning forward with interest. They'd been bored to tears with the wrestling matches before—but now, two skilled warriors were about to face off. What was more, it was rare to see Wu Du so eager to demonstrate his skills. The Four Great Assassins had never submitted to one another in any official ranking, and everyone was curious to know who was strongest.

Wu Du and Khatanbaatar each took up a wooden sword.

Khatanbaatar watched him intently. "Your late emperor's skill with a sword was the envy of all. I wonder how much you learned from him."

"Very sorry to disappoint," Wu Du said, impassive and not at all ashamed. "I followed him for but a few short days and didn't get a chance to learn anything. Speaking of which, did Master Nayantuo leave any last words?"

It was only when he heard this that Duan Ling deduced Khatanbaatar's origins. He leaned forward in the bushes to get a glimpse of the envoy's face, but a hand on his shoulder stayed him. At some point, Xie You, who had been standing in the garden listening to the conversation, had come up right behind them. He gestured for them to stay put and not reveal themselves.

In the garden clearing, Wu Du angled the point of his wooden sword toward the ground, while Khatanbaatar brought his level with his chest.

The onlookers held their breath.

In a blink, Wu Du twisted and leapt forward, both hands gripping the hilt of his wooden sword. His strike wasn't his quickest, but it contained a concentrated force that couldn't be blocked. Khatanbaatar jumped back

before the blow made contact, dragging his sword back in retreat. Wu Du slashed again, and the lunge carried him out of Duan Ling's line of sight.

"Splendid!" cheered the onlookers.

Duan Ling was jittery with nerves; he couldn't see how the fight was going. Noticing how he craned his neck to get a better view, Xie You angled his body to make a little space for him. From that spot, Duan Ling could just barely catch a glimpse of Wu Du and Khatanbaatar clashing in the courtyard.

Their fighting style was like nothing he'd ever seen. Their wooden swords continued to elude each other, about to touch when Khatanbaatar abruptly lunged and whirled into a slash. Wu Du spun aside, striking in return.

Their swords clashed and swirled, the momentum setting their hems fluttering. From that moment on, their movements became faster and faster, the wooden swords a blur. Wu Du fought back against Khatanbaatar with his own martial style. Duan Ling had the sense he'd seen these kinds of moves before, not from martial arts but rather a dance… The Sogdian Whirl?

Upon closer inspection, their footwork and sword technique did resemble the Sogdian Whirl that Batu, Helian Bo, and the other boys used to do in school.

Tall and upright, his black embroidered robe wrapped tightly around his chest and waist, Wu Du poured force into every strike and counterstrike. Khatanbaatar, across from him, stayed steady through the barrage. Dancing the Sogdian Whirl together, they advanced and retreated in an unmistakable rhythm. Compared to the way girls looked when they danced the Sogdian Whirl, bold and wild, when men performed it, the dance accentuated their masculinity while also imbuing them with a graceful beauty.

The two men stopped their dance abruptly. Each no longer able to spin away from the other's blade, Wu Du and Khatanbaatar clashed at last with a roar. Both wooden swords snapped in half, clattering to the ground.

It was so silent one could hear a pin drop. Then Cai Yan began applauding in awe, and the ministers around him shouted their praise. Despite these exclamations, Wu Du didn't move, staring down

Khatanbaatar. Likewise, the envoy's eyes were wide with shock; he was completely taken aback that Wu Du could not only match him blow for blow using his own sect's unique style but end the match in a deadlock.

"I can't defeat you," Wu Du admitted when the cheers died down.

"I can't defeat you either," Khatanbaatar replied, his face ashen.

After a nod toward him, Wu Du turned and cupped his hands toward Cai Yan. He nodded at the onlookers as well before stepping back into line with the other assassins. Khatanbaatar's eyes lingered on him for a time before he, too, returned to his seat.

"It looks like we have a tie again between us," Cai Yan said with a steady smile. "I hope I can meet Batu again in the future."

While the ministers offered a few more congratulatory words, Xie You motioned for Duan Ling and Mu Qing to go back and wait in the corridor, an order they had little choice but to obey. Everyone in the gazebo soon went their separate ways. The Mongols were escorted back to their quarters, while Cai Yan, Mu Kuangda, and the four assassins took the corridor back toward the Eastern Palace.

"I didn't expect the envoy to be Khatanbaatar himself," Cai Yan said. "For Batu to send his strongest warrior—what is the meaning of this? Wu-qing, do you know him?"

"I heard my master speak of Nayantuo's sect," Wu Du replied. "Before the Guardian of the Realm was reforged, it was split into separate weapons and fell into the hands of the Xiongnu. The great founder of the White Tiger Sect stole the four swords back and reforged them into one, creating an irreparable rift between the Central Plains and the Western Regions. In my sect, we are taught that we must prepare ourselves in the event that our old foe returns for vengeance. Thus we are taught the Sogdian sword style. One can defeat an enemy in a hundred fights by knowing both the enemy and oneself."[4]

"Which is to say," Mu Kuangda interjected brightly, "now that Khatanbaatar knows we are familiar with his sword style, he won't dare stir up trouble in Jiang Prefectural City."

"That's right." Wu Du turned to Cai Yan. "I suspected Khatanbaatar must have come here in person to look for Yuan's national sword."

“Father stole Kublai’s sword from the general Ögedei,” Cai Yan said, reminiscing. “But when Shangjing fell, I lost it in the fray. If I still had it, I could trade it with the Mongols for the Guardian—but I don’t want it going back to Batu.”

Mu Kuangda paused in reflection. “After Kublai passed, the sword went to his third son, Ögedei. Right now, every tribe is fighting over who will succeed him as the khan of Yuan. Batu’s father Kuchi is likely also embroiled in the battle. Whoever manages to get their hands on Kublai’s sword now will gain a massive advantage over the others; it makes sense that Khatanbaatar came in search of it. We must discuss this matter further. Why don’t we—”

“Prime Minister Mu, ministers, this way please,” Cai Yan said warmly, gesturing for them to enter the Eastern Palace to hold council. He turned back to the four assassins. “Wu-qing. Why not stay the night in the Eastern Palace as well? I would like to speak with you more.”

He waved Lang Junxia over. Lang Junxia leaned in, tilting his ear toward Cai Yan as he whispered a few orders—after which Lang Junxia turned and left. Wu Du put his fist to his palm in a silent salute. Satisfied, Cai Yan led Mu Kuangda and the ministers into the palace while the rest of the party dispersed.

Wu Du fretted as he waited in the Eastern Palace. Sunset was already approaching, and a light scattering of snow fluttered through the air. After a time, Cai Yan sent a servant to invite him into the side hall to rest and have a cup of hot tea while he waited for the council to adjourn.

At the same time, outside the imperial gardens, Duan Ling was caught deep in reflection. Batu must’ve had a ploy in mind sending out a warrior of this skill—otherwise a normal envoy would’ve served just as well. Moreover, he clearly knew Cai Yan had usurped Duan Ling’s place. Did he intend to use this information as leverage to threaten Cai Yan, or to force him into some agreement?

Batu revealing Cai Yan as a fraud would throw the imperial court into chaos. How vulnerable would the empire be if it needed a foreign prince’s intervention to reveal the true identity of its own heir to the throne? Would Li Yanqiu even believe Batu?

“Where are you from?” Xie You’s voice caught Duan Ling off guard; he still hadn’t fully taken his mind off the matter of his greatest concern and was at a loss for words.

“He’s my study companion,” Mu Qing offered as an explanation. “And Wu Du’s…um… Well, in any case, he’s from my place.”

Xie You studied Duan Ling for another moment and nodded.

“To answer your question, General, I am originally from Xunbei,” Duan Ling said.

“I remember it said that when the prime minister sent Wu Du on a mission to Tong Pass, he took a young man with him…” Xie You said.

“Indeed. That was me,” Duan Ling confirmed with a smile.

“Right.” Xie You eyed Duan Ling like he had more to say, but Mu Qing, whose feet were sore from standing in the bushes so long, shifted his weight to the other leg and diverted his attention. “Your dad’s holding council,” he said to Mu Qing. “Since you’re here in the imperial palace, you may as well come with me.”

As Duan Ling looked around, he spotted Wu Du striding down the corridor toward them with a deep frown, apparently searching for where he’d disappeared to. He grumbled the second he arrived, “Didn’t I tell you to stay home and see to your studies? Why’d you come running over here so rashly?”

Duan Ling had an instinctive urge to duck and hide. Before he could edge away, Wu Du grabbed his arm and pulled him in close. “Is the imperial palace a place you can enter and exit as you please?” he continued lecturing.

Mu Qing instantly went mute. He’d thought it would be fun to bring Duan Ling here—but then they ran into a bunch of important people, and now he too would probably get a sound scolding when he went home. As if sensing his thoughts, Duan Ling accepted Wu Du’s reprimand as a chance to let Mu Qing go ahead on his own, standing demurely next to Wu Du in silence.

“He’s yours?” Xie You asked, studying Wu Du.

“Yes, he’s mine,” Wu Du said coldly.

“Then you should take him. I’ll bring Mu Qing to see Her Majesty the empress.”

“Well?” Wu Du frowned at Duan Ling. “Why’re you still standing there?”

Duan Ling shrank back and hurriedly bowed to Xie You before allowing Wu Du to drag him away. Only once they were out of sight of the general did he relax.

While walking, Duan Ling opened his mouth to speak, but Wu Du gestured for silence. He led Duan Ling along a winding path until they arrived at a remote stretch of corridor. Once there, he pointed for Duan Ling to sit on the railing, then walked off to check both ends and make sure they were alone. The corridor was completely empty, and they had a full view of any passersby.

“Cold?” Wu Du asked.

“No,” Duan Ling said, rubbing his hands together. “Mu Qing brought me into the palace.”

“Reckless,” Wu Du said. “What did Xie You say to you?”

Wu Du sat next to him and reached out, taking hold of Duan Ling’s hands. The residual qi he’d been circulating during the sword fight was still coursing through his body, and his palms were wonderfully warm. The snowflakes that drifted into the corridor and landed on his skin melted instantly. Resting his head on Wu Du’s shoulder, Duan Ling quietly recounted what had happened, adding his own conjectures about Batu’s plans.

“Khatanbaatar bears a grudge against your family for his master’s death,” Wu Du said. “The late emperor killed Nayantuo, so it’s possible he came seeking revenge.”

Duan Ling recalled his father telling him Nayantuo had once tried to assassinate Li Jianhong, only to be killed in the attempt. His father, having slain Khatanbaatar’s master, had sown an irreconcilable hatred between them. If he learned Duan Ling’s true identity, he would almost certainly come looking for trouble.

“Then I should get out of here and go back to the prime minister’s manor as soon as possible,” Duan Ling said.

“Stay here. The Mongols want to sign an agreement, so that guy is in the Eastern Palace right now with Prime Minister Mu and the other high ministers. The imperial palace is the safest place you could be at the moment. When I’m done, I’ll pick you up and take you home.”

But Duan Ling was thinking about something else entirely. He asked Wu Du, “Do you know how to dance the Sogdian Whirl?”

“The Sogdian Whirl? No.”

“Then how did you learn that sword style?” Duan Ling asked, baffled.

Wu Du thought for a moment, then gave him an explanation: Long ago, the founder of the White Tiger Sect had not only stolen the Guardian from the Yulin Sword Sect but had ransacked their treasures—including a collection of manuals detailing their secret martial art techniques, in which the Sogdian sword style they used had been recorded. Across the years since then, the White Tiger Sect had kept the sword and cultivation manuals closely guarded in their own library, lest the Yulin Sword Sect return someday for revenge.

“So you learned it for real?” Duan Ling asked in shock.

“Of course,” Wu Du said. He was restless, occasionally glancing toward the far end of the corridor, then back to Duan Ling. “The White Tiger Sect has a sworn duty to protect the crown prince, so we need to learn a little of everything. I had to warn Khatanbaatar not to pick fights in Jiang Prefectural City. Now that he knows there’s someone here who’s his match, he won’t act out of turn—or who knows what could’ve happened? Especially since the Mongols came here to discuss the border.”

Duan Ling realized that the reason Wu Du had issued a challenge to Khatanbaatar wasn’t on a whim, but to provoke Khatanbaatar into revealing his techniques. That way, they would both know who they were dealing with—and no matter what schemes Khatanbaatar had up his sleeve, he would now have to take Wu Du into consideration. He wouldn’t dare make a reckless move.

“Your footwork was a lot like the Sogdian Whirl,” Duan Ling explained, pulling Wu Du to his feet. He stepped forward, heel to toe, extended his left foot, and tilted his body, teaching Wu Du the dance. Wu Du had to laugh.

With nothing else to do while he waited to be called into the inner hall, he mirrored Duan Ling and tipped in the opposite direction. Wu Du spun left, then right, following Duan Ling. Wu Du looked dashing moving in his brocade robes, while Duan Ling danced more authentically, humming a song Helian Bo had taught him and letting the rhythm guide his steps. Like this, the two of them danced the Sogdian Whirl in the corridor with the snow fluttering down around them.

Suddenly sensing a presence nearby, Wu Du stopped cold, but Duan Ling had no time to hide himself away. He traced Wu Du’s line of sight to the far end of the corridor and saw Li Yanqiu advancing toward them.

Lang Junxia, clad in a white robe, leapt across the tiled roofs and along the dusky streets, pursuing the Mongols’ carriage as it rattled away from the palace. When he arrived at the post house where Khatanbaatar was staying, he scaled the courtyard wall, pushed open a window, and dropped into the study, reaching behind him to wipe his wet footprint from the sill. Leaping up, he caught the roofbeam with his legs, then pulled himself up and sank down on one knee, closed his eyes, and went perfectly still.

Khatanbaatar entered the room with the Mongol entourage. After a few moments, he dismissed everyone except the hulking warrior named Amugu.

Dropping their voices to a murmur, they began speaking in neither Mongolian nor Han but another language Lang Junxia recognized—Khwarazmian. Lang Junxia held his breath on the roofbeam, listening in on the conversation.

“Without a personal letter from him, we have no way of confirming his hand,” Khatanbaatar told Amugu, producing two yellowing papers from his robes. “Is there some other way to get some of his writing?”

“Our prince said the crown prince must leave behind traces of his writing while reviewing memorials to the throne. What if we steal one from

the Grand Secretariat?”

Khatanbaatar lit the lamp. “A mere few words would not suffice as evidence.”

Shock came over Lang Junxia as the lamplight fell over the papers—the pair of yellowing pages belonged to Cai Yan and Duan Ling, answer sheets from Biyong Academy. One was stamped with Duan Ling’s personal seal on the bottom left corner, the other with Cai Yan’s.

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"HOW COME the writing on this letter he gave us today looks like the writing on this test paper?" Khatanbaatar asked.

"Wuluohou Mu raised the crown prince of Southern Chen for a period when he was young and taught him reading and writing. It's natural the prince's hand would resemble his."

"What if we offer these test papers to their emperor as proof?" Khatanbaatar suggested.

"That won't do," said Amugu. "Our goal is to find the boy called Duan Ling; exposing Cai Yan's true identity before we have him won't do us any good."

"We waited three whole months for a single chance to see Li Yanqiu. Who's to say we won't wait another three to see him again? How long must we keep delaying?"

"We must take a different approach—we'll try to get in from Mu Kuangda's side," Amugu said, tucking the test papers away. "We'll think of a way. Don't worry."

The pair took the conversation outside, still speaking in low voices. Once they left, Lang Junxia dropped to the ground and disappeared back through the window.

Inside the imperial palace, Duan Ling had been caught by Li Yanqiu. He had imagined coming face-to-face with his uncle countless times, but never thought they would meet like this.

Li Yanqiu, flanked by his attendants, came to a stop before them, looking from him to Wu Du in a silent question: *Who is this?*

Duan Ling stared dumbstruck at Li Yanqiu. He and Li Jianhong were as alike as twins; they had the same brows, nose, and lips. He even resembled Li Jianhong in build, as if they were cast from the same mold. The greatest difference between them was in their aura—unlike Li

Jianhong, Li Yanqiu came across as weak and reserved. He had a slightly tentative air, as though he approached everything with caution. Li Yanqiu returned his gaze, and the moment—at least for Duan Ling—stretched on and on.

Wu Du had stopped breathing. The air seemed thick with fate, as if the slightest twitch could stir up a tempest for the future of Great Chen.

Yet things did not unfold as Duan Ling had allowed himself to hope. After a moment, Li Yanqiu's eyes slid away from him to settle on Wu Du.

"Wu-qing?" he prompted with an expression of displeasure.

Wu Du nudged Duan Ling, who took the hint and immediately stepped forward and bowed, cupping his hands. "This humble one is named Wang Shan. Greetings to Your Majesty."

"Be at ease," said Li Yanqiu.

Duan Ling stepped back into line with Wu Du.

"What is your relationship with Wu Du?" Li Yanqiu asked him.

Wu Du put his fist to his palm in a salute and began to explain. "Your Majesty—"

"I asked him," Li Yanqiu cut in.

Duan Ling was at a loss for words. Sensing his uncle already had quite an unfavorable impression of Wu Du, Duan Ling felt his heart sink. Through this unlucky series of events, they'd ended up enacting Wu Du's plan ahead of time—but it had led to the result Duan Ling expected: His fourth uncle didn't recognize him.

Though this outcome was within both reason and expectation, his secret hopes for such a meeting were dashed at that moment, vanishing without a trace.

Duan Ling took a moment to regain his calm and think before answering Li Yanqiu: "He's my laoye."

Wu Du choked at his choice of words.

Li Yanqiu, however, burst into laughter. "We beg your pardon?"

Seeing how Wu Du radiated awkward embarrassment, Li Yanqiu realized this boy was part of Wu Du's household. *Laoye*, the head of a

house, was a term that could be used by a manservant, a servant boy, or a wife.

“How did you get inside the imperial palace?” Li Yanqiu asked flatly. “Did Wu Du bring you here?”

Duan Ling remained silent, choosing not to clarify that it was Mu Qing who’d brought him inside lest Li Yanqiu become even more suspicious. Li Yanqiu cast Wu Du a chastising glance. “It appears that to you assassins, the imperial palace is no different than your own backyard—free for you to enter and leave at will.”

“This subordinate wouldn’t dare,” Wu Du replied hurriedly. “Shan-er usually studies at home. I only brought him into the palace today out of concern that he would neglect his studies with me gone. I told him to stay in Jiaotu Hall; I didn’t expect him to run out here to find me.”

As Jiaotu Hall was not far from where they stood, Li Yanqiu seemed to accept this explanation. He turned back to Duan Ling. “How old are you?”

“Sixteen.”

“And since when have you been with Wu Du?”

“Since last year, Your Majesty.”

Li Yanqiu paused his line of questioning and glanced at Wu Du. “Come with me,” he ordered, then instructed the attendants behind him: “Escort Wang Shan back to Jiaotu Hall. It’s far too cold to be sitting outside.”

Wu Du gave Duan Ling an encouraging look before scurrying off behind the emperor.

Safely ensconced within Jiaotu Hall, Duan Ling looked around, now truly registering the enormous size of the palace. Within the hall there were only two eunuchs, one of them holding a tray with a bowl of glutinous rice balls in ginger broth meant for him.

It must be quite boring living in the palace, he thought. Such a large home, yet so empty and cold. He remembered being told how his father was always away on expeditions, leaving his uncle to keep his grandfather company. Li Yanqiu must have often stayed in the imperial palace alone.

Perhaps he was very lonely; perhaps he saw all his attendants—the eunuchs; guards; officials; and even Mu Kuangda's sister, his wife—as outsiders.

Duan Ling sat alone in the hall. He hadn't brought his books with him, and he had no one to speak to; he watched the winter sky darken bit by bit in solitude. Another day had passed in which he had seemingly accomplished nothing but seeing his own too-hopeful dreams dashed. He detested this kind of feeling. He wanted to go home, cook a fragrant stew in a clay pot, and enjoy a piping hot dinner across from Wu Du. Instead he simply watched the happenings within the palace hall flit by—the same scenes witnessed every day by every emperor throughout history. As he reflected on Li Yanqiu's loneliness, his heart tangled with emotions.

When Uncle lived alone in the palace, he must have waited every moment for Dad to come back. Duan Ling knew that feeling intimately. When Li Jianhong was due back from his expeditions, anticipation must have filled his uncle as eagerly as it had Duan Ling.

Growing tired, he slumped over the table and laid his head down, peeking one eye over his arm to look at the sky outside.

A figure stepped out from the colors of twilight and stopped in front of the hall, backlit by the last purple gleam of the sky. As the eunuchs lit the lamps in Jiaotu Hall, the darkness receded, flickering past the silhouette in the doorway. And just like that, Duan Ling's world brightened again.

"Let's go," Wu Du said. "I'm all done."

A smile broke across Duan Ling's face. He quickly stood and closed the distance between them. Wu Du took his hand, lacing their fingers together, and the two of them hurried through the corridors to the stables behind the imperial palace. Wu Du set Duan Ling on Skychaser's back before hopping up behind him, and the pair rode out of the palace together.

"What did he say?" Duan Ling asked.

"His Majesty didn't recognize you," said Wu Du. "He suspects the Mongols have the Guardian. Just now, he summoned me to the imperial study to assign me a mission: find Kublai's sword and use it to barter for our national sword."

The wind and snow picked up as night fell. Although the winds this far south couldn't compare to the biting northern gusts of Shangjing, the air held a damp chill. Wu Du steered Skychaser through the streets and alleyways of the city, shifting Duan Ling in the saddle to tuck him more firmly against his chest.

"What did the crown prince say?" Duan Ling asked.

"Don't worry about him," Wu Du said. "He was still holding council when I left. He probably forgot about me. Do you remember where you last saw Kublai's sword?"

Duan Ling thought back to his flight from Shangjing. He'd had the sword when the Mongols began their siege, but by the time he crossed the wheat field, he'd come down with a fever—and when he woke in the Xianbei Mountains later, the sheath was already gone. Cai Yan had handed him the sword, but when the Mongols attacked, he'd abandoned the sword in the village, instead using Batu's bone dagger to stab the soldier and escape.

He'd last seen the sword, then, on that night. When had Lang Junxia arrived at the village? Perhaps the remaining Mongols had taken the sword with them—but where would they have taken it?

Duan Ling recounted the night's events to Wu Du, who mulled over the story and nodded.

"Wuluohou Mu might have an idea which way the Mongols went," Duan Ling added. "But if they got their hands on the sword, wouldn't they present it to their superiors?"

"Not necessarily," said Wu Du. "If the soldiers had no idea of its value, maybe they held onto it—or maybe they knew what it was, but their commander kept it hidden for his own reasons."

Wu Du reined Skychaser to a halt before a restaurant. Duan Ling belatedly realized that they weren't on their way back to the prime minister's manor, but to dinner. A banner fluttered in front of the shop, emblazoned with the words *World's Best Noodle Shop*.

"This place has been here for three hundred years," Wu Du told Duan Ling. "It's your birthday, so I brought you for a bowl of longevity noodles."

Only Wu Du it seemed, of this entire world, still remembered Duan Ling's real birthday.

"Big talk," Duan Ling joked, "but I hear Zheng Yan is a master in the kitchen. Is this place's food as good as his?"

Wu Du shushed him with a mysterious air, then revealed, "The owner of this shop has defeated Zheng Yan in the past."

Duan Ling had no rejoinder.

Night had fallen, but a clamor still spilled from the bustling restaurant. Wu Du entered, took out a slip of paper, and handed it to a waiter, who cast a glance over the note.

"Gentlemen, this way please. Your private room is upstairs."

"You made a reservation?" Duan Ling asked.

"Of course; you have to make a reservation a month in advance here at World's Best Noodle Shop," the waiter said with a laugh.

A small frown crimped Wu Du's brows, as if he was annoyed by the waiter's chattiness. Duan Ling hurried him up the stairs to save the waiter from a scolding.

"Zheng Yan made the reservation for me," Wu Du admitted.

"You don't need to explain," Duan Ling said, amused and exasperated in equal measure. "Is there any difference?"

Wu Du's cheeks heated.

There were only two tables on the second floor, separated by a folding screen. Wu Du and Duan Ling settled cross-legged at one, facing each other across the table, as the waiter went back downstairs to call for the dishes to be served.

"Today…" Wu Du fell silent for a moment, then continued hesitantly, "Did you feel bad?"

"Bad?" Duan Ling's eyebrows rose. "Not at all. Why do you ask? I'm really happy."

"His Majesty will definitely recognize you someday," Wu Du assured him.

Duan Ling realized Wu Du feared he must be bitterly disappointed by the outcome of their chance meeting—but this was something Duan Ling had expected. He laughed. “It’s okay. I already guessed it would go that way.”

“But he was silent for a long while in the imperial study afterward,” Wu Du added.

“Apart from celebrating the crown prince’s birthday, did the Mongols have any other reason for coming to Southern Chen?” Duan Ling asked. He’d sensed the Mongol envoy’s mission wasn’t so straightforward.

“Can we not talk about politics right now?” Wu Du asked lightly, a glint of amusement in his eyes.

“Okay,” Duan Ling said sheepishly, also finding it silly. As he lifted his eyes and met Wu Du’s, his heart swelled with warmth. “Then what should we talk about?”

Wu Du thought for a moment but came up empty. After all, they were together from dawn till dusk; what hadn’t they said to each other?

“I ate here once before, the first time I came to Jiang Prefectural City,” Wu Du said.

“Dad told me that in spring, when the peach blossoms bloom, Jiang Prefectural City is really beautiful.”

At the mention of Li Jianhong, Wu Du sighed uneasily and flashed him a guilty smile. “Is there anywhere else you’d like to visit?”

Duan Ling thought back on Li Jianhong’s words. “I want to go to Diannan, and Yubi Pass, and all the beautiful places in the world,” he said. “I want to see lakes as clear as mirrors, cold and untouched at the feet of the snowy peaks… And I want to see the ocean.”

If Li Jianhong were still around, would they be celebrating Duan Ling’s birthday together now?

But it was Wu Du who shook him from his thoughts. “Shan-er.”

“Yes?”

Wu Du shifted apprehensively, as if trying to work up the courage to say something. His face flushed red while he searched for the words; he

lifted his teacup and lowered his head to take a sip, his eyes flicking away.

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"I'LL TAKE YOU," he said finally. "To all those places you've never been, the places you want to go. I promise, even if you become…become… I'll still take you. We can sneak out to see the snow, to

see the sea, the mountains and lakes—and we'll only come back when you've seen enough."

Wu Du glanced up at Duan Ling; his eyes were twinkling. Face red, he dropped his gaze and took another sip of tea, avoiding eye contact. As he sat across from Wu Du, Duan Ling's heart churned with strange emotions, different from any he'd felt before. Though it was winter, he felt like a peach tree was growing inside his heart—stretching its branches, unfurling its leaves, and bursting open its fiery blooms.

"Okay," Duan Ling agreed.

His heart was drumming fiercely. For some reason, memories from their time at Tong Pass surfaced in his mind: Wu Du, dressed in his trim stealth robes, leaping across the eaves with Duan Ling pulled tight against his chest. The sky above the walls spangled with brilliant stars as Wu Du in his armor, reeking of blood, held Duan Ling in his embrace.

An emotional deluge crashed against the walls of his heart, as if everything he'd lost when his father had departed was returned to him in the form of this man sitting across the table. Duan Ling

wanted to give voice to that feeling, but no words sufficed to describe it—he didn't even know how to start. "I remember…"

Wu Du looked up at him, and his thoughts immediately jumbled up on themselves. Duan Ling saw only him, and his words became an incoherent mess. "Remember…"

What did I want to say again? Duan Ling was drawing a complete blank.

"Remember what?" Wu Du asked.

“Remember…” Duan Ling, flustered beyond belief, fixed his eyes on the drifting snowflakes outside. “…Remember a—a poem the headmaster once taught me. It’s really nice.”

“What poem?”

Just as he was about to recite the lines, Duan Ling considered the words and his face flamed at the image that took over his mind: Wu Du, pressing him into the bed that night in Tong Pass, the two of them in only their underrobes, telling him mockingly, *Gods, if I wanted to have my way with you, you wouldn’t even be able to cry for help.*

But the Wu Du who sat in front of him now was clad in slim-fitting martial robes, and his hand holding the teacup was trembling.

“I…forgot.” Duan Ling’s heart galloped as memories flooded into his head, but for some absurd reason, it was the poem that stood out in his mind —

Oh the hills have trees, and the trees have knots;

My heart is yours, oh, though you know it not.[5]

When he’d first met Wu Du in Xichuan, Wu Du had given him medicine to save his life. In the Mu manor, Wu Du had granted him the opportunity to study and take the imperial examinations. At Qin Ridge, Wu Du had donned a suit of armor and entered the bloody battlefield for him. On the walls of Tong Pass, he’d ignored his injuries and rushed to Duan Ling’s rescue in the face of grave danger.

The headmaster had once told him this feeling was love. But suddenly he thought that this was a different kind of love than what he’d felt toward his father, his schoolmates…and his thoughts tangled even further. Tongue-tied, he too snatched up his teacup for a sip. When he peeked up and met Wu Du’s eyes, they both froze. Duan Ling stared at him, unable to marshal his thoughts; at the same time, Wu Du reached into his breast pocket to fish something out and missed, knocking over his teacup and spilling a little river of tea toward Duan Ling.

Wu Du hurriedly looked around for a cloth to wipe the table.

“It’s okay,” Duan Ling told him just as quickly.

“Let me call someone to wipe it up,” he said, gesturing for Duan Ling to shift over a bit toward the window. “Waiter!”

The sound of approaching footsteps carried from downstairs. Duan Ling took the spare moment to collect himself. He sat awkwardly, wanting to sneak another peek at Wu Du’s face to see what he was thinking, but he was abruptly too shy to look. In the past he’d simply thought Wu Du handsome, but tonight he was picking up details he hadn’t noticed before. The more he looked at Wu Du, the more handsome Wu Du appeared.

The footsteps arrived, but they didn’t belong to the waiter—another guest had stepped onto the second floor, taking a seat at the table on the other side of the screen. The waiter’s lighter tread followed in behind. “What will you be having, sir?”

“Nothing for me.”

The voice struck Duan Ling like a bolt of lightning. Shock rippled over Wu Du’s face as well.

Lang Junxia!

Why was Lang Junxia here? He was just on the other side of the screen, seated behind Wu Du. Duan Ling’s thoughts whirled. Wu Du reached across the table and placed a steadying hand over the back of his. He shook his head—*Don’t be afraid*.

“But I will take a bowl of your house wontons and a cup of pu’er tea. Have them delivered to the other booth,” Lang Junxia ordered. From the far side of the screen he continued, “Today’s your birthday. I was busy and couldn’t spare a moment to celebrate properly. Try the wontons here. They’re very good.”

Duan Ling made no reply, and the three sat in silence together, none saying a word. In the stillness, the spilled tea flowed across the table and drip, drip, dripped onto the felt carpet below, soaking into the floor of the noodle shop.

Wu Du’s eyebrows slowly stitched together.

“I haven’t had wontons in a long time,” Duan Ling said after a pause.

“Are you afraid they’re poisoned?” Lang Junxia asked through the screen.

Wu Du drew in a sharp breath and was about to speak when Duan Ling took his hand, cuing him to stay silent. Another person was coming up the stairs. His voice reached them before he did: “Another two jars of your wine,” Zheng Yan said from below. “And slice up some premium beef.”

Wu Du was speechless.

“There are private rooms upstairs?” asked Changliu-jun in a surprised tone.

Duan Ling, too, was struck silent.

Why are they suddenly all here? Duan Ling wondered, perplexed. Zheng Yan and Changliu-jun emerged from the staircase. When Changliu-jun spotted Wu Du and Duan Ling sitting across from each other on one side of the screen, he let out a surprised “Oh?”

Nevertheless, he asked for no further details as he stepped into the second booth with Zheng Yan and sat beside Lang Junxia.

Dipping a finger in the tea, Duan Ling wrote on the table, *What are they doing here?*

Wu Du shook his head—*I don’t know*—and pointed outside: *Should we go?*

Duan Ling shook his head back. It was better to stay and listen to the conversation. Since all four assassins had assembled today, this was likely something they’d want to hear about.

“Sorry, Wu Du,” Zheng Yan said with a laugh, poking his head out from behind the screen. “For ruining the mood. I couldn’t find anywhere else that suited, so I brought them here.”

“It’s fine. Go ahead if you guys have things to discuss.”

“It’s nothing urgent, really,” said Zheng Yan. “I’ve been starving all day, though. Let’s fill our stomachs first, then talk business.”

Changliu-jun also stuck his neck out, studying Duan Ling. “Wang Shan, you didn’t return to the manor? Where’s Mu Qing?”

“No,” Duan Ling said. “He’s with Her Majesty. She probably asked him to stay for dinner.”

The waiter brought up a tray and placed their food on the table: two bowls of noodles heaped with a colorful bounty of freshwater fish and shellfish, as well as a bowl of shrimp wontons. A few bright plum blossom petals danced on the surface of the broth.

“The broth here is a secret recipe,” Zheng Yan revealed with a smile. “Eel bones, duck cartilage, beef shank, kelp from the North Sea, and plum blossoms harvested every two years, simmered over low heat for hours. The final touch is a brined plum on top—the ultimate delicacy. You’re missing out if you don’t have some mellow fruit wine with the noodles to bring out the flavor. Wu Du, why don’t you order a jar?”

“Nah,” Wu Du replied. “We’re leaving as soon as we finish. If you guys have something to say to me, best say it now.”

Duan Ling nearly laughed in exasperation. On the bright side, given that Changliu-jun and Zheng Yan were also present, Lang Junxia likely wouldn’t make any trouble for him. He could sit back and relax while Wu Du worked himself up just short of exploding at the other assassins’ antics.

After laying out the dishes, the waiter bowed himself out.

“Unless we call for you, no need to come up again,” Zheng Yan instructed the man before he descended the stairs.

“Do you want the wontons?” Wu Du asked Duan Ling quietly.

Duan Ling shook his head. Neither of them touched the bowl of wontons. Duan Ling took a sip of the noodle broth. It was indeed delicious, with a subtle and delicate sweetness—not oily in the slightest. The noodles were fine and springy, while the clams, shrimp, crab, and fish belly were meltingly tender; the restaurant was indeed deserving of its boastful name.

“I asked everyone here because I have a few matters to gather your opinions on,” Lang Junxia said from the other side of the screen.

“I noticed an empty seat at the Eastern Palace’s council tonight,” Zheng Yan remarked. “I’d hazard someone was busy gathering information.”

“Indeed,” Lang Junxia said. “I followed the envoy to the post house. I discovered something significant, but I can’t do anything with the information on my own.”

The other four listened expectantly.

“Khatanbaatar is Yuan’s envoy,” Lang Junxia explained. “But the man named Amugu is the true leader of the delegation. The two of them have concocted a scheme, a mix of their true plans and deception; Khatanbaatar is working in the open and Amugu in the shadows. Apart from celebrating the crown prince’s birthday, they have come with other motives.”

“Earlier this evening in the Eastern Palace,” Zheng Yan said, “I heard the Minister of Rites say that after the Battle of Shangjing, the Mongols were afraid the Khitan would retaliate. They’re of a mind to ally with us to fight the Khitan, and wish for an accord between our nations. There is the bad blood of Shangzi between Chen and Liao, and the grudge of Shangjing between Liao and Yuan. Among these three kingdoms, each of us has considered the other two our enemies. Prime Minister Mu and the other ministers debated the matter for hours without reaching a decision.”

“What did His Majesty say?” Duan Ling asked abruptly.

“His Majesty said nothing,” replied Zheng Yan.

“Although the late emperor was not slain by the Mongols, he gave his life in the Battle of Shangjing,” Wu Du pointed out. “Even if the crown prince wishes to ally with Yuan now, His Majesty will not agree.”

“This may be the case today, but there are no permanent enemies, only permanent interests,” Lang Junxia argued. “Since the Battle of Shangzi, all the hatred of the nation has been pointed at the Liao Empire. Who could have predicted the late emperor would lead an army back to Shangjing to save Yelü Dashi?”

“Wuluohou Mu, are these your words or the crown prince’s?” Changliu-jun asked.

“Does it matter?” said Zheng Yan. “Borjigin Batu and the crown prince are childhood friends; it’s said they swore to be each other’s anda. The late emperor himself rescued Kuchi and Batu and escorted them out of Shangjing. The Borjigin clan wants to stop warring with Great Chen and restore good relations.”

Wu Du glanced over at Duan Ling, who pointed at himself and nodded. He frowned and spread his palms—as if encompassing the whole

of the situation—then wobbled his hands slightly. Wu Du understood: Duan Ling was confirming that the detail about being Batu's anda was true, but that their personal relationship couldn't extend to, nor be the deciding factor for, relations between their two nations.

"So?" said Changliu-jun. "Are we forming an alliance or not?"

"As for that, we'll have to ask Wu-xiong," Lang Junxia said. "I don't imagine His Majesty summoned you to the imperial study today to chitchat about your family."

Duan Ling held his silence.

"His Majesty gave me an order," Wu Du admitted, "but I can't divulge the details."

"I'll carry out the order for you if you want," Zheng Yan said. "Right now, you're the person most clear on His Majesty's intentions, so enlighten the rest of us."

"We all work for our own masters," Wu Du said. "But seeing as this pertains to the well-being of the nation, I suppose there's no harm. The order concerns the Guardian. His Majesty wants to exchange Kublai's sword for ours."

Silence reigned for a moment. Lang Junxia was first to speak. "Then His Majesty does not wish to discuss an alliance. Changliu-jun, what are the Mongols' terms?"

Changliu-jun hesitated—but though the others in the room were unclear on the matter now, if they had a mind to, they could easily find out. What he was about to say wasn't much of a secret.

"When the Mongol envoy arrived in Jiang Prefectural City three months ago," he began, "they paid Prime Minister Mu a visit. At the time, Khatanbaatar claimed the Guardian was in Yuan, but not in Batu's possession. If our nations agree to form a brotherly pact, Great Chen must pull back its troops in the north from Jiangjun Ridge and open a trade route between the north and the south. In addition, we must cede the cities of Ye and Hejian to Yuan."

"Ye is a major city in the northern regions," Duan Ling piped up. "We cannot cede it."

“They offered to trade us one hundred twenty li south of Yubi Pass. This land exchange would let the Mongols funnel all their resources into dealing with the Liao Empire and begin chipping away at their northern border. If the court decides to accept this treaty, we will trade cities, Yuan will return the Guardian, and our rulers will connect our nations through marriage to create lasting peace, swearing never to transgress upon the other.”

The Guardian had remained lost all this time. Now it seemed very likely that the Mongols had it in their possession.

“Marriage?” scoffed Wu Du. “With whose family? Don’t tell me it’s Marquis Yao’s again. How many daughters does he have to marry off?”

Wu Du sounded positively delighted at the prospect, but as soon as Duan Ling heard Zheng Yan’s explanation, he understood why the assassin was fretting over it. Commandery Princess Yao Zheng would surely prefer to marry anyone than be sent off to marry a man in the remote north—and if the court really agreed to the alliance, all her father Yao Fu could do was bid a tearful goodbye to his beloved daughter.

Chapter 100

"ANYWAY," Zheng Yan said, "That's the situation we're faced with. Now we can all hear Wuluohou Mu's report."

Silence fell over the room again.

"I predict the Mongols will use both hard and soft tactics in carrying out their plans," Lang Junxia said. "As for their specific methods, I'm still gathering information."

"Hard and soft tactics?" Wu Du sneered. "If the soft tactics don't work, what hard tactics could they possibly bring to bear? Don't tell me they think they can blackmail the crown prince of a nation?"

His retort was cleverly worded: Only Lang Junxia, Duan Ling, and Wu Du himself understood what he meant. Up until that precise moment, Lang Junxia had had no way of ascertaining whether Wu Du knew Cai Yan was a cuckoo in a magpie's nest. Obviously, Lang Junxia couldn't declare in front of everyone that Khatanbaatar planned to use the false crown prince's true identity to threaten him into doing everything possible to bring an alliance to fruition.

"What are Prime Minister Mu's thoughts?" asked Zheng Yan.

"That I don't know," said Changliu-jun. "You'll have to ask Wang Shan."

"I know even less," Duan Ling said. "Prime Minister Mu hasn't told me a thing."

"Ultimately, if His Majesty and His Highness refuse the alliance, they have the final say," Changliu-jun added. "Can't we simply settle the matter by sending Khatanbaatar and Amugu on their way back to Yuan?"

"That's where the problem lies," Zheng Yan replied. "No one wants to give the order. Not even His Highness is willing to stick his neck out and chase them away though he is, in fact, the most suitable person to do so."

Envoys brokering an alliance should reasonably be treated with respect; running them out of the city was unthinkable. Yet the Mongols had

claimed that the reason for their visit was celebrating the crown prince's birthday—they'd come bearing gifts. Cai Yan could easily discharge them with a letter of gratitude at any moment if he so chose.

"I don't think it would be so simple," Duan Ling said. "If Amugu doesn't want to go, he'll make up a reason to stay. Besides, the ministers of the Chen court don't understand the Mongols. They may be brusque, but they're not stupid—they merely approach things differently than we do, and they've got sharp noses for their opponents' weaknesses. Ögedei was able to breach Shangjing precisely because he was able to see the rift between Yelü Dashi and the Han clan. I'm sure you all understand the gains and losses involved in this."

Lang Junxia paused in consideration. Zheng Yan had heard tell of Wang Shan's deeds at Tong Pass, and Changliu-jun often heard Chang Pin and Mu Kuangda sing the brat's praises. Neither were surprised in the least by his analysis.

"What do *you* think we should do, then?" Zheng Yan drawled.

"Does His Majesty want this alliance?" Duan Ling asked Wu Du.

Wu Du shook his head. "No. If he did, he wouldn't have ordered me to search for Kublai's sword."

"And does the crown prince want this alliance?" Duan Ling inquired further.

All eyes fell on Lang Junxia, who gave no answer. Cai Yan, of course, didn't desire it. Firstly, he'd surmised that Li Yanqiu was unwilling. Secondly, he'd been the direct target of the Mongol envoy's threats and coercion. Given the opportunity, he'd silence the lot of them—Batu included. A pity even Lang Junxia's power wasn't so astronomical as to do so.

"Changliu-jun, does Prime Minister Mu want this alliance?" Duan Ling asked.

Having finished his noodles, Changliu-jun had replaced his mask. "What, can't you ask him yourself? You're in his favor right now. He won't hide anything from you."

“If he won’t hide anything, then you can tell me now,” Duan Ling replied.

“The Minister of Revenue, Su Fa; the Grand Secretary, Wu Zun; Commander of Black-Plated Army and Defender-General of the State, Xie You—these are the officials who support an alliance,” Changliu-jun said, then turned to Lang Junxia and Zheng Yan. “In other words, everyone in the gazebo today but Prime Minister Mu wishes to form an alliance with the Mongols. As for the prime minister himself, I don’t dare make wild conjectures.”

Indeed, there were both advantages and disadvantages to an alliance with the Mongols. Duan Ling understood why those Changliu-jun had mentioned were in favor of it. Such an agreement would mean, at the very least, ten years of peace at the frontiers—and the Mongols would then be free to take care of the Liao Empire. Great Chen might even be able to launch its own attack on Liao’s southern border and gain back some territory.

An end to the ongoing skirmishes would also mean lower taxation and conscription rates, allowing Jiangnan to break free of the decades-long cycle of exhausting their troops, which had followed the Liao emperor’s southern invasion. The regions south of the Yangtze River would be given the opportunity to recover, grow, and develop.

“Does Marquis Yao want this alliance?” Duan Ling looked at Zheng Yan.

“I’d say no,” he answered with confidence.

“Then we’ll go with your guess,” Duan Ling decided. “Wuluohou Mu, find out the exact details of their hard tactics—we want to know what they’re planning. It would be best to eliminate the threat before it becomes a problem. Zheng Yan, pay Khatanbaatar a visit under the pretense of orders from Marquis Yao. Express goodwill and promise we’ll continue to discuss the alliance and try our best to push it through. See if you can get them to let anything slip about whether the Mongols indeed possess the Guardian of the Realm.”

From there, Duan Ling issued them each directives in turn: “Those two came here with the goal of brokering an alliance. You should suggest that they use their money to bribe the ministers of the court to speak on

their behalf before the crown prince. But Zheng Yan, make sure you don't take anything they offer.

"Changliu-jun, you pay them a visit too. Hint that Prime Minister Mu wants to form an alliance, but that of course the crown prince has the final say. Tell them the crown prince's stance is uncertain, and that he often listens to a select few ministers.

"Wu Du, ask His Majesty for an imperial edict to investigate the bribes. When they start handing them out, find out who takes the money. Changliu-jun, relay that information back to Prime Minister Mu; tell him to find the evidence of bribery and give it to Wu Du—Wu Du can present that to His Majesty as grounds to dismiss the envoy from the court. As for who accepts the bribes, whether they do or not is entirely up to them. Assuming Su Fa and Wu Zun take them, Prime Minister Mu and the crown prince can use the bribes as leverage over their clans however they like. We can be sure Xie You won't accept any such offers. He only acts in the interests of the nation."

As Duan Ling finished speaking, silence descended over the room.

Zheng Yan burst into laughter. "I was right to come here tonight after all. Let's go, then. Everyone, go do what you need to do."

Nobody on the other side of the screen had anything further to say. The three assassins got to their feet; they'd come in a hurry and went the same way, leaving behind one screen and two people. Wu Du's bowl of noodles remained untouched, while Duan Ling's was already empty.

They left? Just like that? Duan Ling thought. Though he supposed that was to be expected. Their time was precious.

"Uh—where was I?" he blurted, the clumsy redirection rendering Wu Du temporarily speechless.

They stared at one another. Duan Ling desperately wanted to hear Wu Du tell him more about how he was going to bring him to see the snow, the sea, all the beautiful sights of the land—about all the things he would do for him—but Wu Du didn't.

"It's getting dark out, and cold," he said instead. "If you're done, let's go home and get some rest."

Duan Ling got to his feet, casting a glance down at the congealed wontons on the table. A few fine snowflakes drifted through the window and landed in the bowl.

On the way back, Duan Ling rode in front of Wu Du on Skychaser, as they always did. Wu Du wrapped him in a cloak, shielding his face from the cold. With his head resting on Wu Du's chest, Duan Ling listened to his heartbeat. Too many old memories had resurfaced tonight.

He thought about the old man on the street in Runan who'd struck his clapper while selling wontons; he thought about how, when Lang Junxia had been chased all the way from Huchang to Shangjing by Wu Du, he had also held Duan Ling just like this as they rode home from school. Lost in his recollections, Duan Ling's mind drifted further, to that first, fateful night in Shangjing: how he'd tiptoed out of the room and followed the sound of singing voices down the corridor. The gilded city of Shangjing and its usual sea of lights had been hidden by crisscrossing flower drums and the deep shadows cast by the lamps. He'd stood on his tiptoes and peeked through a window to see a colorful kaleidoscope—countless dreamlike scenes forming and dissipating before his eyes. It had been like catching a glimpse of a brand-new world.

"Cold?" Wu Du asked, lowering his head slightly when he felt Duan Ling lift his own. Duan Ling only held him tighter. He squeezed Duan Ling's arm and assured him, "We're almost home."

"No…" Duan Ling searched for the right words, but he was completely lost within his reverie.

Once they arrived, Wu Du lit the lamps, and the doorways brightened. The prime minister's mansion had been the residence of a wealthy Jiang Prefectural salt merchant in the previous dynasty. He'd once kept a concubine whom he loved dearly in this side courtyard, and thus made sure that the underground heating pipes for warming the mansion would reach her so she would be able to live in comfort. Now, this blessing extended to Duan Ling.

Wu Du folded their snow-damp clothes, set them aside to dry, and stored Flashblade, which he'd drawn so dramatically earlier that day. Duan Ling's eyes followed him around the room. He'd never noticed Wu Du was

so handsome and dashing before, but now every little motion made his heart pound.

“What’s wrong?” Wu Du asked, thinking Duan Ling was acting strangely.

“Nothing.” Duan Ling took a seat on the low divan off to one side, waiting for Wu Du to come sit beside him once he was done with his tasks so he could lean against him as usual.

Instead Wu Du asked him, “Are you still hungry? Should I call someone to make more food?”

“I’m full,” Duan Ling insisted.

Wu Du pulled open a medicine cabinet drawer and took out some ingredients.

“What are you making?” Duan Ling asked.

“A prescription. You reminded me earlier… Hey, don’t come down here. It’s cold on the floor. Can’t you just stay there on the divan?”

Duan Ling determinedly took a seat at the table and watched Wu Du weigh out the ingredients. Gripping a paring knife in his long, slender fingers, Wu Du flipped it, crushed the dry ingredients with the dull edge, then scraped the powder into a tiny copper mortar.

His fingers are beautiful too, Duan Ling thought.

“This is poisonous,” Wu Du said. “Don’t touch it.”

He drew a silk glove onto his right hand, selected a glowing butterfly wing from his assembled ingredients, and used the knife to scrape powder off its surface.

“Is your hand healed yet?” Duan Ling asked.

Wu Du cast him a glance. “It’s been healed for a while.”

Duan Ling took it, examining the spot where he’d been stabbed. Though his palm had healed, it’d left a soft scar.

“Another palm line,” Wu Du joked.

“What about your right hand?” Duan Ling reached for it.

“My right hand’s fine. It’s poisonous! Don’t touch!”

Leaning over the table, Duan Ling tilted his head and studied Wu Du's nose and lips. The more he looked, the more he liked what he saw; he felt a sudden urge to draw closer and kiss him, but didn't have the courage. Wu Du was wholly focused on developing the poison—when he noticed Duan Ling had been staring fixedly at him the entire time, his cheeks flushed red.

"Don't sneeze," he warned, "or…"

"I'll die," Duan Ling finished, amused. Before Wu Du said it, he hadn't felt the need to sneeze, but now that he had, Duan Ling's nose began to itch.

"Do you know what's so impressive about Laoye making this prescription?" Wu Du asked, raising an eyebrow at him.

Duan Ling shook his head, still looking at him intently. He murmured a light "Uh-huh."

"Tired?" Wu Du asked, noticing his unusual absentmindedness—he hadn't even responded to Wu Du's teasing. Assuming he must still be dwelling on his earlier meeting with Li Yanqiu, Wu Du stripped off his glove and left to wash his hands. When he came back, intending to comfort him with a hug, he found Duan Ling already lying in bed.

Wu Du settled down in bed beside him as he did every night, but on this night, Duan Ling's breathing quickened. When Wu Du stretched out an arm for him to pillow his head on out of habit, Duan Ling scooted over nervously.

"Why's your heart beating so fast?" Wu Du asked, baffled.

"It's not."

Wu Du laid a hand on his chest, then his forehead—no fever. When he reached into Duan Ling's underrobes to feel his bare skin, Duan Ling at first relaxed into his touch, thinking how amazing those fingers felt on his body.

Then he panicked, and yelped, "Don't!"

Wu Du stopped, withdrawing his hand, and the two lay together. Several times, Duan Ling wanted to turn on his side and cuddle in closer,

but he was too nervous to act on it. He couldn't even tell what he was nervous about; he just knew his heart was turning loops in his chest.

"Wu Du," Duan Ling said. Wu Du had fallen silent, and suddenly Duan Ling missed his voice. "What's the prescription for?"

"It's a slow-acting poison for those two barbarians, Amugu and Khatanbaatar. It'll make their bodies react poorly to the local food; they'll suffer from indigestion."

"Do you have anything like a laxative?"

Duan Ling often wondered what skilled martial artists like Changliu-jun, Wu Du, Zheng Yan, or Lang Junxia would do if they urgently felt the call of nature during a duel.

Wu Du laughed. "You want a laxative for those two?"

Mu Qing had once told Duan Ling that, before killing a target, Changliu-jun would first remove his mask, then utter three phrases: *Hello. My name is Changliu-jun. I've come to kill you.* Only then would he attack. At that point, no matter how skilled his opponent was, they would die via a single stab to the throat. Rumor had it that everyone who'd ever heard those three phrases had perished, with the sole exception of Wuluohou Mu.

But if that were true, how could Mu Qing still be alive, as someone who'd heard those phrases? No, that wasn't important. Still considering the matter of laxatives, Duan Ling pictured Changliu-jun taking off his mask. *Hello*, he would say. *My name is Changliu-jun*—and then he'd have to wave for his target to give him a moment before ducking into the bushes to relieve himself, leaving the third phrase unsaid. The image made him burst into laughter.

Chapter 101

"WHAT ARE YOU laughing about?" Wu Du asked, confused.

"Nothing," Duan Ling said, schooling his face to seriousness lest Wu Du actually prank Changliu-jun as he'd imagined and end their brittle friendship—formed slowly, and with great pains—just like that.

"Are you working tonight?" Duan Ling asked.

"No." Wu Du helped Duan Ling take off the Radiant White Tiger Armor, folded it neatly, and placed it by the bedside. He told Duan Ling to stop fidgeting and go to sleep.

Duan Ling still suspected the Mongols had some form of leverage they had yet to reveal—but that was Lang Junxia's problem. Lang Junxia was probably under more pressure than he was. He would surely be too preoccupied to make another attempt on Duan Ling's life for some time. And yet—it seemed Lang Junxia hadn't told Cai Yan that Duan Ling was still alive. That didn't make sense.

As he lay with his head on Wu Du's shoulder, Duan Ling's thoughts began to stray again. He wanted to wrap his arms around Wu Du's waist. A rush of excitement flowed in the wake of this impulse. Wu Du had a truly spectacular figure, with broad shoulders and a slender waist—a bit like his dad's—and Duan Ling loved to wind his limbs around him in bed.

But when he shifted his leg over a few inches more, he brushed against Wu Du's groin. He didn't know if Wu Du was asleep or not, but there, he was surely awake—and Duan Ling could feel him getting hard.

Does Wu Du like me too? As the thought crossed Duan Ling's mind, all the nights they'd spent together flashed through his head. Wu Du did love to tease him, even going so far as joking about "having his way" with him…

Mind in complete disarray, Duan Ling cracked open his eyes and snuck a glance at Wu Du. His chest rose and fell evenly as if he was already in a deep sleep. Duan Ling had also been running around the entire day, and his eyes were growing heavy. Slowly, he slipped into slumber.

After a long time, Wu Du gently turned on his side, face-to-face with the sleeping Duan Ling. He drew him into his arms and gathered him against his chest, even closer than usual. Out of habit, Duan Ling slung a leg over his waist, leaving them tangled in each other's embrace.

Wu Du stared at him, breathing as lightly as possible, their bodies pressed so close their breaths mingled. He took a moment to wrestle back the urge to kiss Duan Ling—and then, with a deep breath, forced his eyes closed and eventually fell into a peaceful sleep.

Duan Ling had a strange dream.

He was naked, lying in a cart pulled by Skychaser. Sitting up with a start, he flushed and shifted the dry hay to cover himself.

"Dad!" he called.

No one answered—but a majestic white tiger with upturned eyes emerged beside them. Keeping its gentle stare fixed on Duan Ling, it bounded onto the cart and carefully pawed the layer of hay away, baring Duan Ling's naked body to its gaze.

Duan Ling was both aroused and mortified, but resisting never occurred to him. Instead he took the white tiger into his arms. The tiger laid its weight down on him and nuzzled its nose against his cheek, puffing up its fur and relaxing its body atop his own. Duan Ling moaned in pleasure as the most intimate parts of him rubbed against the soft fur, and a thrill coursed through his body, gathering low in his belly before rushing out of him with such intensity that all his other senses were drowned out.

The room was already bright when Duan Ling woke up. When he rolled over and unconsciously reached for Wu Du, he found the spot beside him empty.

"Wu Du?" Duan Ling crawled upright to discover his pants gone and his feet cold on the covers.

"Out here!" Wu Du yelled from the courtyard, sounding vexed.

Flushing, Duan Ling wrapped the covers around himself. What had happened last night—and why had his pants mysteriously disappeared?!

“What are you doing?” he called back.

“Washing your pants!”

Something felt off. *Did Wu Du do something last night while I was asleep? Like what they do in the brothels? But how would his…go in my…* Duan Ling’s hands flew to his backside—but there was no pain, so what the hell had happened?!

“Wh-wh-wh-why did you take off my pants?” he stammered.

“You wet the bed.”

“That’s not even possible! I’m sixteen!”

“You wet the bed, okay?” Wu Du insisted, sitting in the courtyard scrubbing a thin pair of pants in the frosty morning air, his hands red and his face a matching shade of scarlet. “Just drop it!”

“I did *not* wet the bed,” Duan Ling said stubbornly.

“Fine. It was me. *I* wet the bed, all right? Drop it.”

Duan Ling burst out laughing. But something still wasn’t quite adding up. He touched the bedding beneath him; if one of them really peed, there should’ve been a giant wet spot. He jumped down, pulled on the first pair of pants he found, and scurried out into the courtyard with an outer robe wrapped hastily around himself. Wu Du’s pants had been thrown to one side, waiting to be washed, while Wu Du scrubbed at Duan Ling’s with his head down.

Duan Ling inched over to examine Wu Du’s pants, but Wu Du grabbed them and threw them into the basin, shooing him back inside with reddened cheeks and ears.

“Why’d you wet the bed?” Duan Ling asked at breakfast.

Wu Du paused, then begged, “Just drop it. Laoye’s been pent up for a long time. Last night you kept rubbing against me, so I couldn’t help it, okay?”

“Couldn’t help what?” Duan Ling asked, confused again.

Wu Du dragged a hand across his forehead. “From now on, you sleep on the bed, and I’ll sleep on the floor.”

“No way!” Duan Ling whined.

Wu Du waved for Duan Ling to eat his breakfast with a helpless look on his face. As Duan Ling ate, the previous night's strange feeling came back to him. It was as if he'd found some answers in that dream: Physically he felt exhausted, but his mood was airy and light.

Had Changliu-jun and Zheng Yan already completed their tasks? No, they couldn't have moved so fast. Duan Ling mulled over the plan he'd shared last night. It was currently the twelfth month. The new year was fast approaching. Try as they might, they couldn't accomplish everything before then. And thus, without any news, the pair fell back into their usual routine. After breakfast, Duan Ling and Wu Du left for the day's lesson with Mu Qing.

Mu Qing was quiet in class that day. Duan Ling kept thinking back to the strange dream he'd had the night before. Even after running it through his head again and again, Duan Ling still felt something wasn't right. He pondered. Mu Qing seemed to know a lot about this kind of stuff—actually, hadn't he once asked Wu Du to make him an aphrodisiac?

Wu Du, meanwhile, was completely out of it. He stared into space, his eyes flicking every now and then toward Duan Ling. The only other student, Changliu-jun, was mouthing *The heaven was black and the earth was yellow; the universe was chaos*…as he held up a copy of the *Thousand Character Classic*, not daring to recite aloud.

Once afternoon arrived, Wu Du went out to scoop a handful of snow from the corridor to wipe his face. Duan Ling took advantage of his absence to nudge Mu Qing. "Hey, Shaoye. I have a question for you."

Duan Ling had left without saying goodbye the day before. Mu Qing had been terribly put out and had come this morning fully intending to give Duan Ling the silent treatment as punishment. Upon hearing one question from Duan Ling, however, he reverted to normal, taking it as Duan Ling's attempt to make amends. "What is it?" he asked. "You want to go back to the imperial palace?"

"No, no." Duan Ling made a little negating gesture, then leaned in. "Have you ever seen anyone do…*that*?"

"What?" Mu Qing, now utterly confused, also leaned closer.

Duan Ling thought for a moment and decided to ask plainly: “When boys grow up… When they’re asleep, do they sometimes…”

Mu Qing looked at him, brows knotted.

“…wet the bed?” Duan Ling painfully forced out the rest of the question.

Realization dawned on Mu Qing.

After the slightest pause, a snicker burst from his lips. Duan Ling’s face flushed crimson all the way down his neck. Mu Qing leaned the rest of the way in to whisper an explanation in his ear, and Duan Ling’s eyes grew round with disbelief.

“Don’t you come from a family of doctors?” Mu Qing asked incredulously. “How could you not know this stuff?”

“I-I really didn’t know,” Duan Ling stammered. “My dad never taught me.”

“Do you want to have fun?” Mu Qing said slyly, snickering again. “I can teach you.”

“No, no, no,” Duan Ling said.

Dazed as he was, the implication of Mu Qing’s invitation flew right over his head. Images summoned by Mu Qing’s words filled his thoughts: He recalled the erotic pictures he’d seen in Qunfang Pavilion, and the boy first sent in to serve him, and the burly man who’d come in after and kicked the door closed behind him. Myriad feelings washed over him; he was at a total loss for words.

Changliu-jun, who’d seemingly been taking a nap on the low table with the *Thousand Character Classic* over his face, said in a different voice: “Young Master!”

In Duan Ling’s shock, his jaw dropped practically to the floor.

“You’re very handsome, Young Master,” he continued, speaking in the exact voice Duan Ling had heard before. “Shall I sing you a song?”

The man he’d met at the Qunfang Pavilion that night had been Changliu-jun! Duan Ling’s world immediately turned on its head.

“Y-y-you! Changliu-jun, you!” He was so mortified he wanted to crawl into a hole.

“Young Master, want to have some fun?” Changliu-jun crooned. “Hm?”

Duan Ling realized all at once that Changliu-jun must’ve been there that night to spy on him and Wu Du. So the carriage Lang Junxia had seen, the one from the Mu manor, had actually belonged to Mu Qing—which meant that Mu Kuangda had known about Wu Du and Cai Yan’s secret meeting from the very beginning. After he thought it through, Duan Ling’s surprise faded, but the awkwardness very much remained. Although, seeing how Changliu-jun and Mu Qing didn’t seem uncomfortable in the least, he supposed he had no reason to keep feeling embarrassed.

“Do you go there often?” Duan Ling asked.

“Just to play around,” said Mu Qing. “Didn’t Wu Du bring you there to play too? Or did he…”

“No.” Changliu-jun, the book still over his face, was crystal clear on the matter. “Wu Du’s as much an ever-loving prude as the virtuous Liuxia Hui.[6] He treats his dear adopted son as the apple of his eye. Let’s see how long he can hold himself back!”

Mu Qing was most shocked to learn this.

“Stop—no more!” Duan Ling cried. “Okay, okay. Let’s leave it at that. You two, go back to studying.”

Duan Ling had been embarrassed after asking Mu Qing those questions—but for some reason, once Changliu-jun joined them, the conversation felt much less awkward.

Moments later, Wu Du came in looking for a towel after washing his face. As he entered the room, shards of ice still dusting his dark brows from the frigid wind outside, he found the three of them staring at him.

“What are you looking at?” he asked, baffled.

All three averted their eyes in a hurry, turning their attention elsewhere.

Chapter 102

“HOW DO YOU SAY this word?” Changliu-jun asked Duan Ling.

Pretending to teach Changliu-jun how to read, Duan Ling scooted over at once; the three of them huddled together, as if the text at hand required all their concentration. Wu Du lifted Duan Ling by the collar and dumped him back into the seat at his side, and the two pairs continued studying with a clear boundary drawn between them.

Duan Ling had begun to find his books boring. When life had been harsh, he’d longed to go to school; now that life was good, he wanted to skip class. When he’d been wandering desperately, he’d dreamed of reaching his goals every day—but now that he was safe and settled, he just wanted to ride off and have fun with Wu Du.

His days in Tong Pass had been filled with excitement. When would he be able to go out and travel again? The world was vast, and filled with endless curiosities. If he someday took the throne, the rest of his life might be spent cooped up in the imperial palace like his fourth uncle, never leaving, chained to that chair in the name of duty.

In the afternoon, Chang Pin arrived with recommendation letters for Duan Ling and Mu Qing to each sign and stamp with their personal seals. The letter would serve as official proof that

they were students of the prime minister’s manor. With this, they could skip the provincial exams and proceed directly to the upcoming metropolitan examinations to be held out of the normal three-year cycle by imperial grace this spring. The final hurdle, after that, would be the palace examination. After they signed the papers, Chang Pin led Duan Ling and Mu Qing to Mu Kuangda’s quarters, but found the prime minister already in a meeting with another civil official. A young man in his early twenties stood waiting under the eaves.

“This is Huang Jian, the young master of the former Imperial Salt Censor, Minister Huang,” Chang Pin informed them.

Only now did Duan Ling learn that there was another student apart from himself who'd acknowledged Mu Kuangda as his teacher. The three students greeted each other. Although he was the oldest, Huang Jian seemed to be a man of few words, unaccustomed to the fast pace of the new capital. As they were all fellow students of the prime minister, they sorted out their seniority after some chatter—but having done so, Huang Jian became taciturn, soon bidding them goodbye and leaving the manor to go back to his lodgings in the city.

There were only two months left before the exams. Duan Ling was starting to get nervous, as if he needed to purge all distractions from his mind and focus solely on studying.

But what was he studying for? As he flipped through his books later that evening, his spirits began to fall.

He'd already met Li Yanqiu, and his fourth uncle hadn't appeared to recognize him at all. Was he doing all this study and review to pass the palace exam and become a jinshi[7] just so he could walk into the central hall of the imperial palace and reveal himself to Cai Yan? Or was he doing it to achieve a top ranking so he could announce to everyone, while showered in imperial favor, that he was in fact the real crown prince of Southern Chen?

The consequences of doing such a thing didn't bear thinking about. Suddenly, it all seemed pointless; he wanted nothing more than to sweep his books to the floor. But when he looked up, he caught sight of Wu Du practicing martial arts in the courtyard.

Wu Du noticed him and paused mid-routine to come inside. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I'm just tired."

Quietly, Duan Ling looked up and met his eyes. His thoughts were in turmoil as he gazed at Wu Du. He tried so hard, but it was as if fate itself was toying with him—some fickle whim of chance always seemed to dash his plans. What exactly did the world want of him?

On this lonely night, as the snow melted and dripped off the eaves, Wu Du seemed to sense Duan Ling's low mood. "I'll go buy you a late-night snack," he offered. "What do you want?"

“Don’t go,” Duan Ling protested. Feeling guilty now, he forced himself to perk up. “It’s too cold outside.”

“What’s wrong?” Wu Du asked, still attentive. “Not getting enough sleep?”

Duan Ling took a deep breath. He wanted to spill all his gloomy thoughts to Wu Du, but after a moment, he pressed his lips shut. It wouldn’t be right. Wu Du had sworn on his life to protect him; Duan Ling couldn’t turn around and say such cowardly words to him.

Instead he smiled. “I’m just nervous. It’s almost time for the exam.”

Understanding dawned on Wu Du. “No need to overexert yourself. Whatever happens, we’ll figure out what to do together.”

Duan Ling couldn’t help but recall the similar words his father had said to him before Biyong Academy’s entrance exam.

Undeterred, Wu Du stepped out to find him some food. Duan Ling exhaled a long sigh into the deep silence of the night.

A flute melody floated into the courtyard.

Joyful Reunion!

The song evoked a feeling he hadn’t had for a very long time. Who was playing it? The sound of the flute came from just outside the gates, at times soft and tender and at others loud and robust, washing Duan Ling’s heart with warmth.

He realized—it was Wu Du’s melody that had caught him unawares and absorbed him.

No matter how lonely and scared he was, whenever he heard this particular melody, it put his mind at ease and gave him a burst of courage. Once the notes subsided into silence, the tapping of Wu Du’s wooden clogs faded away into the distance.

Duan Ling stared into space at his desk. This melody had been played by Lang Junxia, by his father, and even by Xunchun before the fall of Shangjing. Scenes flashed through his mind like a spinning carousel, urging him to keep pushing forward.

When Wu Du returned home, he found Duan Ling slumped over his desk, asleep.

The people of Jiang Prefecture weren't used to the cold. As soon as night fell, they all retired to their warm houses to sleep. Though he'd taken a long stroll through the streets, Wu Du hadn't found any stalls open and returned empty-handed.

He breathed warm air into his hands, then rubbed them together until they were no longer cold before he scooped Duan Ling up and carried him to bed, settling in beside him.

The next day, Duan Ling was back to normal. There was nothing more the tutor could teach them at this point before the exams; instead, he ordered them to review on their own. Duan Ling spent his days in the library of the prime minister's manor with a mountain of memorials to the throne, studying Mu Kuangda's methods of governance. Mu Kuangda was an erudite man who wielded his extensive knowledge to full advantage, and before Duan Ling realized it, the prime minister's influence had crept into his own writing style.

Reading through Mu Kuangda's memorials, Duan Ling understood why his father hadn't executed him. The current consolidation of the Mu family's power had been inevitable. In the decade after the imperial family of Chen had settled in Xichuan, Mu Kuangda had to use every trick in the book to raise taxes nearly threefold in order to sustain the steady stream of soldiers sent to the northern border to guard Yubi Pass.

At the sound of approaching footsteps, Duan Ling sat up. Changliu-jun was walking toward him through the sunlight that filtered in through the windows of the library. There was no one else around.

Changliu-jun took off his mask. "Everything's in place."

Having been shown Changliu-jun's face without warning, Duan Ling was gripped by terror. He drew a breath to call for Wu Du, who was still downstairs.

"Why the panic?" Changliu-jun asked, surprised.

"Are…you going to kill me?" Duan Ling asked in fright.

“What?” Changliu-jun was taken aback, but quickly realized the issue. “Haven’t you seen my face before?”

Oh, right.… Duan Ling scrutinized Changliu-jun’s face. It was indeed the same one he’d seen in Qunfang Pavilion, but with the addition of a tattoo at the corner of his mouth. Rather than ruining his looks, the tattoo only sharpened his coldhearted air.

Changliu-jun leaned forward and braced one hand on the bookshelf beside Duan Ling. He played with his mask with the other, swinging it back and forth. Looking down at the cornered Duan Ling, he bared his canines in a wicked grin.

Duan Ling’s hackles rose. “I’m going to scream.”

Reluctantly, Changliu-jun took his hand off the shelf and eased back. “Those two Mongols have indeed gone around handing out bribes.”

It’d been long enough that Duan Ling had nearly forgotten the instructions he himself had given. It turned out making the plan so complicated had its drawbacks: Before Wu Du had even gotten a chance to retrieve the imperial decree or use his poison, Zheng Yan and Changliu-jun had already finished their respective tasks.

Changliu-jun fished out a slip of names and handed it to Duan Ling. “For you. It’s Wu Du’s turn now.”

Duan Ling took the paper. Changliu-jun’s wobbly writing filled the page. The months of schooling had apparently been put to good use after all.

“Good work,” Duan Ling said. “What did Prime Minister Mu say?”

“He said he heard nothing,” Changliu-jun replied with a smile.

That old fox, Duan Ling thought. *He really can read minds.*

“Then we’ll carry on as planned. We’ll take it from here,” Duan Ling said. He folded the list and strode toward the stairs to hand Changliu-jun’s calligraphic masterpiece over to Wu Du.

“Wait,” Changliu-jun called from behind, stopping Duan Ling in his tracks. “When you earn the title of jinshi, will you be my teacher?”

The question stumped Duan Ling. “Your…t-teacher?” he repeated, dumbfounded.

“Yeah. Teach me how to read. The people with real learning in the manor never have any time, and the people with time are ignorant and unschooled.”

Duan Ling was stunned by this act of flattery. “Why not ask Mu-shaoye?”

“I…” Changliu-jun paused, hesitating. When Duan Ling eyed him strangely, he said, “You know more than him. His calligraphy isn’t as good as yours.” Then he added: “Well, that’s settled then!”

Before he knew it, Duan Ling had somehow agreed.

“Did you memorize a lot of poems? Teach me how to write one,” Changliu-jun said.

“Not…really,” said Duan Ling, who only knew how to compose a bit of crude doggerel. “But I’m good at essays.” A flash of clarity struck him. “What kind of poems do you want to write?”

“Ah, you know, just casual poems about whatever. I’ll come over with some cured meat tonight.”

“No—no need,” Duan Ling blurted, given a fright when Changliu-jun started to kneel as if to formally take him as his teacher. “No need for such formalities! We’ll just do this for now: I still need to prepare for the exam, and then afterward I’ll have time to teach you. Okay? Let’s go with that.”

With this clarified, Duan Ling encouraged him to go back and continue reviewing the *Thousand Character Classic*. Then he scurried downstairs to find Wu Du by the pond looking at fish.

“I was about to go up and see how things were going,” Wu Du said. “But that brute wanted to be *enigmatic*; he insisted he had to meet with you in secret.”

Unsure whether to laugh or cry, Duan Ling gestured that they would talk back at home. Thinking on how Changliu-jun wanted him for a teacher, he came to another realization: As soon as the metropolitan exams began, their tutor’s duties would be fulfilled. He would no longer be needed to

teach Mu Qing and Duan Ling, and would likely return to his hometown. At that point, Changliu-jun would also no longer be able to listen in on their lessons. Chang Pin, preoccupied as he was with strategies on a much grander scale, wouldn't deign to teach an assassin how to read—and Mu Kuangda, though the man was a walking encyclopedia, was too busy handling state affairs and even less likely to bother. Changliu-jun's only choice was to find someone with enough spare time to be his teacher.

Three years of schooling at Ming Academy, two and a half years at Biyong Academy, and another half year in the prime minister's manor: Duan Ling's life of rigorous study would soon come to an end, and he would bid farewell to his erratic career as a student. Duan Ling felt wistful at the thought; it seemed like a dream. He recalled the day Lang Junxia had taken him to school for the first time—and the scolding he'd received from the headmaster afterward.

Was it all over, just like that? Duan Ling felt as if the time had passed in a blink, over before he could even learn anything.

"What kind of chicken scratch is this?" Wu Du asked when handed Changliu-jun's list of names, his face twitching.

Duan Ling stared at the paper in silence.

"This should be 'Lin,'" he said, putting his head together with Wu Du's as they examined the list. After squinting at the page for a solid few minutes, they deciphered most of the names. Wu Du took it back to Changliu-jun for clarification, only to receive a disdainful scoff: Could he not read a character as simple as *Xie*?

Wu Du and Duan Ling discussed their plan. Three days remained until the second day of the second month: the date of the metropolitan examination. Wu Du would go take a look at the examination ground, then make a trip into the imperial palace to request a secret imperial edict from Li Yanqiu.

"I'll go w—"

"You'll stay right here," Wu Du said with finality. "At home, studying."

Duan Ling had no choice but to stay put while Wu Du changed into a formal set of black martial robes. It was still cold outside, so Duan Ling

draped a heavy blue suede mantle over his shoulders.

Wu Du didn't set out but stood dazed for a moment, letting the slush of melted snow seep into his boots. Finally he said, "After the exam, let's go on a trip."

He turned back and smiled, then ruffled Duan Ling's hair once before mounting Skychaser with Flashblade strapped to his side.

The horse's hooves kicked up mud as Wu Du galloped out of the alleyway, his mantle fluttering in the wind. Duan Ling's eyes remained fixed on him until he rounded a corner and disappeared from view. He went back inside, stretched, then made several circuits of the courtyard, examining each peach tree in the garden, bored out of his mind.

Jiang Prefecture had many peach trees. This would be Duan Ling's first spring spent in the city. When would the trees bloom? As he put his finger to a bud, he saw a sliver of pale pink peeking from within. Spring would soon be upon them.

Chapter 103

THE LAST OF THE FALLEN leaves swirled in the wind as the imperial palace welcomed spring. Flower buds' tender, yellow outer shells scattered over the ground at the gentle rustling of the breeze. As the warmth of spring came only to give way to cold days again, a lingering melancholy hung in the air.

A Black-Plated guard stood in Wu Du's way. "Sir, please remove your sword."

"I have the late emperor and the crown prince's permission to wear my sword in the palace," Wu Du replied.

The two of them were at a deadlock.

"By orders of General Xie, unless given express permission by the emperor himself, *everyone* must remove their swords when entering the palace. A special case was made when you met with the Mongol envoy."

"Let him in," came Xie You's voice.

Unwittingly spared committing a crime for which the punishment would be violent diarrhea, the guard allowed Wu Du to pass. Xie You eyed Wu Du, giving him a smile that didn't reach his eyes. Wu Du's lips quirked. Xie You had, without a doubt, already seen through Duan Ling's scheme. The envoy had likely contacted him as well.

"Here to see His Majesty?"

"Returning from seeing His Majesty?" Wu Du returned.

Each answered question with question, neither providing a clear response. Wu Du brushed past the general and strode toward the imperial study with his mantle fastened up to his neck, hiding Flashblade underneath.

"Wu-qing?" Li Yanqiu called from within the study, informed of his arrival by Zheng Yan. "Come in."

Li Yanqiu was seated, flipping through a stack of memorials regarding the spring plowing. A pre-written imperial edict waited at the edge of his desk.

“The Guardian is yet to be found,” said Li Yanqiu. “So you cannot wield it to represent us in your investigation. However, our imperial edict should serve just as well.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” Wu Du said as he took the imperial edict.

“A moment,” Li Yanqiu said, stopping him from stepping down. “We have some questions for you.”

Zheng Yan wisely stepped outside to guard the doors. Wu Du cast him a glance as he went, finding his presence here odd. Zheng Yan guarded the emperor one moment, the Eastern Palace the next. Had he finally been cast out by the crown prince?

“After completing this task, you will officially enter the imperial palace,” Li Yanqiu said. “Seeing as you once served the late emperor, we shall grant you a title of the fourth rank and permission to wear your sword within the palace while you serve the crown prince. You will supervise him and ensure he is not lax in his duties. In a few years, assuming you maintain a clean record and pass your review, you will be appointed as the crown prince’s Junior Guardian.”

Though it was an empty title, the office of Junior Guardian of the Eastern Palace was nonetheless one of the second rank. In the blink of an eye, he would soar above most court officials and be set on equal footing with Xie You.

No wonder the general had given him that look.

Li Yanqiu waited for Wu Du to tremble in shock or thank him with tears of gratitude trailing down his face, and yet he did neither. He would have thought that Wu Du was moved beyond words, but after a moment of hesitation, Wu Du merely put his fist to his palm and, after a beat of hesitation, bowed low.

“This subject is guilty of failing to carry out the late emperor’s last orders and does not dare to accept this imperial grace.”

There was a moment of silence.

“It was the crown prince’s personal request for you to enter the Eastern Palace,” Li Yanqiu said flatly. Had Zheng Yan been present, he would have sensed Li Yanqiu’s anger and urged Wu Du not to be so stubborn—to agree first and find room to maneuver afterward.

“This subject has a poor character and will produce the opposite effect Your Majesty desires,” Wu Du insisted. “For this reason, I do not dare accept this honor.”

Li Yanqiu set down his brush and eyed him. A ray of sunlight slanted into the imperial study, painting a bright line across Wu Du’s face. Li Yanqiu was baffled: What on earth made this man so bold?

Suddenly, Li Yanqiu chuckled. “Wu-qing, oh, Wu-qing.” He sighed.

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Out of the four, you are the only one whom we cannot read,” Li Yanqiu said amiably, scrutinizing him over the desk.

“This subject is faithful,” Wu Du declared. “I may not have others’ way with words, but my loyalty belongs only to Your Majesty.”

“A position of the second rank is truly a waste of your martial skill and strategic thinking,” Li Yanqiu said with earnestness. “You ought to be the Grand Guardian of the crown prince; a pity the post is already occupied by Wuluohou Mu. Since you are so adamant in refusing to enter the Eastern Palace, you may go back and live your life as free as a bird.”

An object came flying toward Wu Du’s head, and ink splattered over his face. A fighter of Wu Du’s skill could easily have ducked as soon as Li Yanqiu reached for his inkstone, but he chose to stand and let it hit him.

“Go back and see to your tasks,” Li Yanqiu said, smiling. “With that amount of determination, you could be the future Restoration General of Great Chen.”

Wu Du wiped his face. Ink dripped down his neck, seeping into the collar of his robes. He bent and retrieved the inkstone, proffering it with both hands, and placed it neatly back on the desk before bowing his way out of the imperial study.

When Zheng Yan saw half of Wu Du's face splashed with ink, as if someone had painted a mask on him, he doubled over with laughter.

"Zheng Yan," Li Yanqiu chided from within the study.

Zheng Yan froze and hurried inside at once.

Wu Du entered the imperial garden and cupped some water from the pond to wash his face. Before long, footsteps approached.

"The plan must be put on hold for a few days," Lang Junxia said from behind him. "A few additional matters need investigating."

"Since when do you call the shots?" Wu Du sneered.

Lang Junxia watched him with narrowed eyes, no doubt wondering why he had ink all over him, as well as how he could be so arrogant despite it.

Wu Du wiped his face, then examined his reflection in the pond.

"You still have some on your neck," Lang Junxia pointed out magnanimously.

Wu Du reluctantly wiped his neck too. "You can have three days."

Without speaking another word, Lang Junxia turned and left. Wu Du took a moment to examine his reflection from a few different angles before leaving as well.

He thought he'd done a good job cleaning himself up, but the instant he got home, Duan Ling burst into laughter at the sight of him. The pond was not a mirror, after all, and hadn't reflected a clear image. On this fine spring day, the sun shone down brightly on Wu Du standing in the courtyard with his face smudged like a calico cat's.

Duan Ling cackled until he couldn't breathe, never having imagined Wu Du would return in such a state. The present Wu Du and the one who'd left earlier that day were two completely different people, and the combined astonishment and hilarity hit Duan Ling as if he'd taken a laughing pill; he fell forward onto the table with insuppressible guffaws.

Wu Du couldn't help but laugh too. "Did I miss a spot?" he asked, smearing his face some more.

Duan Ling thought he might pull a muscle from laughing. The two kept at it for a while, trapped in a cycle of continuous giggles.

“How did this happen?” Duan Ling asked, gasping for breath.

“I was walking along, minding my own business, when the wind blew over a piece of paper with wet ink,” Wu Du joked. “It landed right on my face.”

The explanation was so stupid it put Duan Ling into another fit of laughter, struggling as he crawled outside to heat up some water to wash Wu Du’s face. Wu Du considered his own joke, also finding it more and more funny as time passed. Just seeing Duan Ling made him want to make the young man laugh. If taking a hit from Li Yanqiu had Duan Ling cracking up like this, then the censure was well worth it.

“Then how come there’s ink on your clothes too?” Duan Ling exclaimed. “You’re soaked!”

Wu Du, shirtless, found the soap and left to scrub himself down while Duan Ling folded his outer robe and mantle. Eyeing the ink splashed all over his clothes, Duan Ling carried them to the back courtyard to wash.

“What happened really?” he asked. “Did you get whacked with an inkstone?”

Before Wu Du could reply, a voice at the doorway announced that Prime Minister Mu had requested his presence. Duan Ling came running too, but Wu Du gestured for him to wait, pulling on the first coat he found and speeding away to answer the summons.

Mu Kuangda had been extraordinarily busy over the past few days, so much so that he hadn’t even made time to see his own son. Despite this, he’d dismissed everyone and called Wu Du to a private audience—one even Changliu-jun was absent from.

Mu Kuangda personally brewed a pot of tea and poured him a cup.

“To think you would dare turn down the post of Junior Guardian of the crown prince,” he began in a measured tone. “What exactly is your objection? According to what Mister Chang Pin tells me, the only one who exists in your eyes these days is the young Wang Shan; you don’t care about

anyone else. Since he came to the manor, you've learned to act with tact and started getting your life together."

Wu Du made no response, simply taking a sip of his tea.

"Do you remember the day I personally brought you out of the imperial prison?" Mu Kuangda said lightly. "This was not what you promised me. If there is anything you want to tell me, speak now."

"The imperial palace is a mix of the honest and the corrupt," Wu Du said after a moment of thought. "I don't want to be a part of it."

"Is that your real reason?" Mu Kuangda asked. "I don't believe it is."

"What I have right now is good enough."

"And what is that?" asked Mu Kuangda.

Wu Du took another sip. "The world is ever-changing, and it's hard to know a person's heart. Sometimes, what changes is not one's situation, but one's own desires—and what one fears isn't someone else, but oneself. That's why I want to stay here in this manor with Shan-er. You can call me unambitious or uninspired if you like. Either way, I'm happy spending my days like this."

Silence fell over the study. Mu Kuangda was an astute man. He understood what Wu Du was trying to convey, and his words shot down any reason Mu Kuangda had to install him at the crown prince's side. After all, the greatest variable in his plan was Wu Du himself: If he entered the imperial palace, could he promise to forever follow Mu Kuangda's orders first and foremost? And if Mu Kuangda came to oppose the crown prince, would Wu Du be able to remain absolutely loyal to the Mu family?

Could a person's loyalty be bought with money? If not with a thousand taels, what about ten thousand? Perhaps in the future, Mu Kuangda and Wu Du's paths would slowly diverge—but this was not a future Mu Kuangda desired.

"You may be satisfied, but that doesn't mean Wang Shan is," Mu Kuangda said at last. "Wu Du, think carefully. Even if you don't marry, once Wang Shan takes a position in court, he's sure to take a wife. What will you do then?"

“We only live so long,” Wu Du said. “Even a short period of joy is worth it. Whatever he does, whatever he chooses, is his decision, completely separate from mine.”

Mu Kuangda let out a gusty sigh. “Never mind. I should’ve expected this kind of stubbornness from you. I thought your temperament had changed recently, but you are still the same man, through and through.”

Wu Du cupped his hands and took his leave.

When he arrived back at the courtyard, Duan Ling was in the middle of hanging the laundry.

“Back so soon?” he asked, turning his head.

Wu Du smiled as he watched Duan Ling, not saying a word.

“Why are you smiling?” Duan Ling asked.

“No reason,” Wu Du said as he walked into the courtyard and sat down, eyes fixed on Duan Ling.

Something didn’t seem quite right with Wu Du. Duan Ling ventured, “Did you get the imperial edict?”

Wu Du thought for a moment. “Yes. We can dispatch the shadow squad, but there’s no rush. Let’s wait until after the metropolitan exam.”

Duan Ling nodded, but he too was unable to keep his eyes off Wu Du for long. His heart was in turmoil—these three days were the final remaining of his lifelong career as a student, and signaled the beginning of the next chapter in his life. If he didn’t make the list of passing candidates for the metropolitan exam, the only path left to him would be to become an advisor in the Mu manor, serving at Mu Kuangda’s beck and call—like Chang Pin. Though Mu Kuangda treated his strategist well, the man had no achievements of his own, forever living the life of a wandering scholar.

Outside in the yard, Wu Du began playing the flute again, and Duan Ling’s mind gradually calmed.

“If I pass and become a jinshi, can I ask for something?” Duan Ling said out of the blue.

Wu Du set down his flute and cast a glance back inside. “What?”

“I’ll tell you after I pass.”

Wu Du simply nodded, but that nod was like a promise.

If he asked Wu Du to do *that* with him… Would Wu Du agree?

Chapter 104

UNAWARE THAT HIS restlessness came from the changing of seasons, Duan Ling only knew that there was a lust he couldn't suppress howling inside him, threatening to burst out. His first thought had merely been to request Wu Du buy him a skewer of candied hawthorn—but stranger thoughts had slowly crowded into his head in the days leading up to the examinations.

On the morning of the exam, a petal drifted in through the window and landed on Duan Ling's cheek.

"Time to wake up," Wu Du said.

He sat up, bleary-eyed, as Wu Du pulled the doors open onto a sky pink with fluttering peach blossoms.

Duan Ling was stunned.

Bountiful peach blossoms, with the brilliance of a flame.[8] In a single night, the peach trees had bloomed all throughout Jiang Prefectural City. Spring had come, more vivid and breathtaking than in Shangjing. With a delighted cry, Duan Ling looked around their courtyard and saw that the trees there had also burst into clouds of pink overnight.

After breakfast, he and Wu Du went into the city. The sun shone brilliantly up above, and blossoms of different colors—bright and beautiful—filled all the nooks and crannies of Jiang Prefectural City, their petals dancing in the breeze above the main streets.

"It's pretty," Wu Du said as he rode through the streets with Duan Ling seated in front of him. The last time he'd come to Jiang Prefectural City had been at the end of spring, when the magnificent blooms were already withered; this time he couldn't help but pull Skychaser to a stop to appreciate the city's beauty.

"It's gorgeous," Duan Ling gushed, momentarily lost in the sight.

The new capital was bustling with people. After making a few turns, they arrived at an area cordoned off by guards. The space behind Chengjun

Pavilion had been appointed as the examination grounds. The Grand Secretariat, where the ministers held their meetings, was located one street down.

He wanted to enjoy the scenery a little longer, but Wu Du shooed him forward. “Go on. It’ll all be here waiting for you when you’re done.”

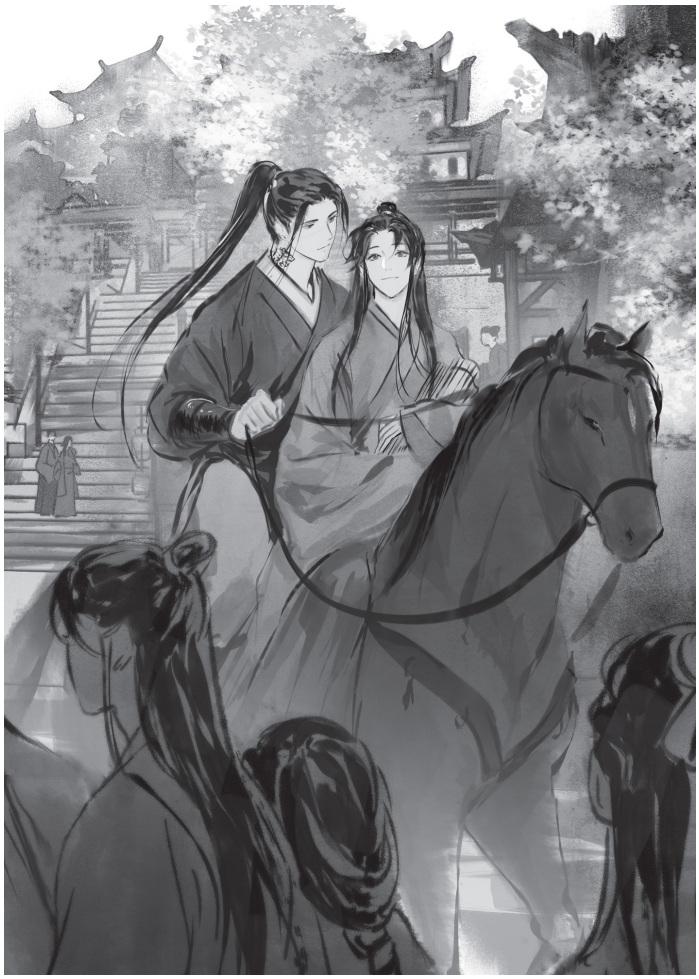
Duan Ling turned to face him, and Wu Du tousled his hair. They handed their name plaques to the Black-Plated guard, who glanced at them before letting them through. The sons of Jiang Prefecture’s gentry were all gathered before the gates, their horses and carriages squeezed into every inch of the alleyways around Chengjun Pavilion.

“Perhaps we’re a little less flashy, but we *are* riding the late emperor’s steed,” Wu Du joked.

Laughter bubbled up to Duan Ling’s lips.

When Wu Du tried to see him into the examination grounds, he was stopped by a Black-Plated guard. “Attendants must remain outside.”

“I have some things to do,” Wu Du said to him. “I’ll be waiting here for you to come out this evening. Don’t be nervous—you’ll do great.”



“I…” Duan Ling wanted to burrow into his arms. But he was already sixteen, no longer a small child who needed to be seen into the schoolyard. “Okay. I’m going in.”

Standing in the spring wind outside Chengjun Pavilion, Wu Du retrieved his flute and began to play. As the melody rose, the busy alleyways quieted. All eyes went to him. It was as if the song “Joyful Reunion” coaxed all the blossoms in the alleyway to bloom even more luxuriantly.

“That’s Wu Du!” someone murmured.

Whispers raced through the bustling alleyway: The Four Great Assassins’ names were known far and wide, and many boys had looked up to them in Xichuan. Of the four, Wu Du was considered particularly mysterious. Some said he was a master of poisons; others that he was a traitor responsible for the death of the late emperor. No one expected to see him drop off a student at the metropolitan exam—or to play “Joyful Reunion” on his flute in the midst of the busy crowd.

Duan Ling stood quietly, watching and listening until the melody died away, his gaze filled wholly with this man in the vernal breeze.

Wu Du’s presence had begun to catch the attention of more and more people in the alleyways, all of whom peered at him curiously. Once the last note faded, however, he simply turned and slipped away through the crowd. This time Duan Ling didn’t run after him—he knew Wu Du would be back.

“Was that Lord Wu Du just now?” said a voice at his shoulder—his fellow student, Huang Jian.

Not expecting to run into the young man here, Duan Ling hurriedly greeted him and received a greeting in return. Though they were both students of the prime minister, they’d only met briefly and had yet to talk in depth. Now was as good a time as any to get to know each other.

Huang Jian was a man of few words, and appeared composed and collected. When they’d first met, he’d limited himself to curt replies like *yes* and *a pleasure*. His looks were ordinary, his complexion slightly darker than Mu Qing’s and Duan Ling’s. He seemed to have great knowledge of the classics but was hindered by his plain appearance—not the type of

person Mu Qing would gravitate toward, but since he'd apparently caught Mu Kuangda's eye, he must have been a talented scholar.

"Let's go," Duan Ling said. As they walked together, searching for their spots in the examination grounds, Duan Ling answered belatedly: "And yes, that was Wu Du."

"Is he an assassin?" Even the taciturn Huang Jian showed a healthy amount of interest in heroic warriors. All young men loved stories of swordsmen standing for the principles of righteousness.

"He is." Duan Ling laughed. "But he's very kind. He never kills without reason."

"I heard His Majesty summoned him into the palace yesterday to appoint him as the crown prince's Junior Guardian," said Huang Jian. "Only for Wu Du to turn him down out of principle. He truly is an outstanding man of our generation."

Duan Ling's heart jolted as his mind flashed back to Wu Du's behavior yesterday. Was that what had happened? *No wonder!*

Distracted, Duan Ling muttered an absent-minded goodbye and entered the examination grounds with his mind still stuck on the subject. Had Wu Du turned down the position of the crown prince's Junior Guardian because of him? He must have.

He'd thought that once he met Li Yanqiu, he could plot further how to retake his rightful place as crown prince—but after meeting his uncle, Duan Ling had found himself at a dead end, unable to advance and left with no choice but to retreat. He sat with a million feelings swirling in his head until the proctor walked in and began handing out papers. To prevent cheating, each student wrote their exam in a separate stall; the proctor even had them stamp the papers with their fingerprints to be thoroughly checked afterward.

Just then, the sound of a flute drifted in over the pavilion walls—Duan Ling could tell at once that this time, it wasn't Wu Du's melody, but Lang Junxia's.

"Who's that playing the flute?" the proctor asked, stopping in his tracks.

Everyone in Duan Ling's row of students could hear the music.

"'Joyful Reunion,'" the proctor observed.

"Have you heard it before, sir?" Duan Ling asked. For some reason, he felt very calm.

"In the blink of an eye, many years have passed since the tragedy of Shangzi," the proctor said ruefully. "I didn't think I would hear this song twice today."

The melody seemed to go on forever. When it at last came to a stop, the examiner left, sealing Duan Ling's stall with a paper strip. Duan Ling faced the blank exam paper, "Joyful Reunion" still echoing in his ears. The examiner's words had struck him with a sudden revelation, clearing away the haze fogging his mind. The tragedy of Shangzi, the humiliation of the empire's defeat, the southern exodus of the Chen Empire, the fall of the capital, the ceding of northern lands to Liao and Yuan—the immense responsibility of reclaiming the homeland would weigh heavy on their shoulders until the day came when they expelled the foreign tribes back north of the Great Wall.

Perhaps to him, the position of crown prince was merely a question of identity. But to many others, the son of Li Jianhong—the royal Li family's true heir—was quite possibly their last beacon of hope. The two iterations of "Joyful Reunion" had reminded not only Duan Ling of this history, but all the students gathered in the examination grounds as well.

Duan Ling opened his examination booklet. The topic was an excerpt from *The Analects*: "The events of the past must not be blamed, for the future can still be redeemed."

The relations of the four nations of this land—Southern Chen, Liao, Yuan, and Western Liang—were like a vast and tangled net. A painted scroll of their territories, with all their mountains and rivers, seemed to roll open before Duan Ling. Past, present, future. The countless, interconnected relationships of the people of Southern Chen within the last ten years crisscrossed before his eyes: the joys and tragedies, the partings and reunions during the war, had entwined with one another to bring him here—to this time and this place. If he were the crown prince now and commanded the court, what would he do?

Li Jianhong's voice echoed in his ears. *Your Majesty, it's your turn.*

Duan Ling picked up the brush and dipped it in ink. All the confusion miring him dissipated into thin air. His weasel-hair brush swept across the page with the spirit of a hot-blooded iron cavalry thundering across a glacier. This strength was the result of both a lifetime of arduous studying and the heavy undertaking he would be required to shoulder for the rest of his days.

He had one more opportunity to show himself in front of Li Yanqiu: by scoring a top rank in the palace examination.

Wu Du brought Li Yanqiu's imperial edict to the capital's military headquarters. Most of the high-ranking officers had gone to supervise the exams; only Xie You had remained behind.

"Requesting forty soldiers to investigate the Jiang Prefecture officials' collusion with the Mongols," Wu Du said, presenting the edict.

Xie You appeared to have expected him. "You're a few days later than I anticipated. Let's hope that doesn't put a hitch in things."

His subordinate offered Wu Du a cup of tea, which Wu Du declined. Taking the forty soldiers with him, he left at once and headed deeper into the city, this time to an office compound called the Shadow House. The Shadow House had been established in the previous dynasty for the sake of protecting members of the imperial household, as well as foreign emissaries. Ten years ago, the shadow squad's former commander, Feng Duo, had been jailed for secretly colluding with Liao court officials, leaving them leaderless. Later, when Zhao Kui took command, the shadow squad had been resentful of Wu Du's favored position and refused to heed his orders.

But their positions were now reversed, and furthermore, Wu Du held the emperor's edict. He charged the shadow squad to get to work, out of sight, while he headed for the officials' residences to pay each one on the list a personal visit.

"Minister Su," Wu Du said as he intercepted a carriage in front of the Ministry of Revenue. He extended a hand, gesturing for the minister to climb into his carriage. "A word, if you please."

“Wu Du?” said the Minister of Revenue, Su Fa.

Wu Du gestured again for him to enter the carriage, and Su Fa, seeing the city guards arrayed all around him, had no choice but to climb aboard.

Once he was seated, Wu Du wasted no time. “It’s come to our attention that the Yuan envoy Khatanbaatar paid a visit to Your Excellency’s residence on the seventeenth of last month. Would you mind telling me what you discussed?”

“Wu Du!” Su Fa exclaimed, his face twisting in anger. “Who told you this? Who sent you here? This is slander!”

Wu Du picked up a box from the seat beside him, lifted the lid, and presented Su Fa with three luminous pearls.

“These are gifts Khatanbaatar offered you. We found them in your home, along with eight banknotes of two hundred taels apiece and an exquisite piece of red coral. If it’s not too much trouble, can you leave a fingerprint for these gifts?”

“You… Wu Du!” Su Fa’s face drained of color. He’d never imagined someone had been watching his dealings with the Mongols. With renewed vehemence, he denied it again: “No such thing happened!”

“Here is the gift register,” Wu Du said, presenting this to Su Fa as well. On the front of the register was a gold leaf seal, followed by the header *To His Excellency Su Fa.*

Presented with this incontrovertible proof, Su Fa could no longer deny his involvement. He began to tremble in fear.

“The gifts you can keep,” Wu Du said with utmost courtesy. “The register, I will accept in your stead. You may leave the carriage when you’re ready. I simply wished to confirm that these gifts belonged to you.”

Rattled, Su Fa stumbled, weak-kneed, out of the carriage.

“Onward, to the Grand Secretariat,” Wu Du directed the driver.

The day passed in the blink of an eye. Before Duan Ling knew it, it was late in the afternoon. He reviewed his essay, which spanned from the founding of the empire to what he’d learned about the conflict between the

four nations and Southern Chen's own situation from his father; then to all Mu Kuangda had discussed around the moving of the capital, including the matter of the gentry seizing the commoners' land; and finally expounded on the tripartite balance between the Liao and Chen empires and Yuan that kept the other nations in check. At the end of the essay, Duan Ling signed his name as Wang Shan.

When the bell tolled, the proctor arrived to take his papers.

"You have an excellent hand," he remarked.

Duan Ling rose and gave him a bow. A clamor rose in the courtyard as the students streaming out began discussing the examination topic. The courtyard was a sea of strange faces, but Duan Ling could tell from their accents alone that they belonged to two distinct groups. One consisted of the scholars who'd come from Xichuan, whereas the others were the locals of Jiang Prefecture.

Spotting Duan Ling in the crowd, Mu Qing jogged his way.

"Sorry, I went ahead on my own today," Duan Ling said upon seeing him.

Mu Qing, already used to Duan Ling's habits, waved away the apology. "How was the exam?"

"Not bad," Duan Ling said, smiling.

From Mu Kuangda, he had a solid picture of the abilities and learning of the sons of the local gentry who would be his competitors in this exam. His time spent learning in the Mu manor had been invaluable in more ways than one, allowing him to analyze the role Southern Chen would play in the Central Plains in the years to come.

Something suddenly occurred to Duan Ling. "Ah!" he exclaimed in a panic. "I think I made my essay into a memorial."

"Well, the exam's over now," said Mu Qing.

A crowd of family members waited outside to pick up the students.

"I'm going to wait for Wu Du," Duan Ling told him. "You go on ahead."

"I'll wait with you," Mu Qing insisted.

Duan Ling and Mu Qing waited together late into the spring evening, yet Wu Du did not arrive.

Chapter 105

ELSEWHERE IN the city, tucked into an alley, Wu Du collected the last gift register from a member of the shadow squad and compared it to Changliu-jun's list of names. In total, there were seven guilty officials.

"Good work." He dismissed the men and sent them off with the carriage. The sky grew dark as he stood in the alleyway, waiting.

Footsteps sounded in the distance, drawing closer, but the visitor was not the one he'd expected. A muscular figure came into view at the mouth of the alley: the Yuan envoy Amugu. The two faced off, a few paces apart.

"Wu Du."

"Amugu." Wu Du cocked a brow. "Yuan's strongest warrior."

Wu Du's eyes swept over him, coming to rest on the saber strapped to his waist. "That's an impressive saber. Too bad you don't have the skill to match. I've been wanting to say as much since we met in the palace."

"What do you want?" Amugu said. "Name a price to hand over the evidence. Whatever it is, we'll meet it."

"I think you've misunderstood," Wu Du told him. "Step aside. I don't wish to kill a foreign envoy."

"Then you have my apologies."

The time for words had passed. Amugu's saber flashed from its scabbard, but Wu Du left his own sword sheathed, sidestepping the strike. He flicked his thumb against the hilt of Flashblade, and a handspan of naked steel peeked from the scabbard.

They swiped past each other. Amugu's curved saber gleamed with a cold light. Both whirled, and Wu Du used the exposed edge of Flashblade to block Amugu's saber. A piercing screech rang through the alleyway—neither weapon was forged of common metal, and neither man yielded an inch.

Amugu bore down, keeping Wu Du trapped within the alleyway. Now that he'd realized Wu Du wasn't someone to underestimate, he didn't dare continue attacking carelessly. Amugu sprang back, holding his breath, his eyes tracking and considering Wu Du's every move.

"Hey!" A cheery voice rang out from behind him as a man stumbled into the alley.

Startling Amugu was no small feat, yet this man had snuck up on him completely undetected. He spun, his blade slicing down—and the newcomer, Zheng Yan, shuffled lightly aside to dodge the blow.

Wu Du wordlessly observed.

"What's Lord Amugu doing here?" Zheng Yan asked.

Glancing between the two of them, Amugu could tell at once they'd previously arranged to meet here. "Shut up and hand over the goods!"

"What goods?" Zheng Yan asked, wobbling out of Amugu's way; he tipped this way and that as he swiped back with drunken fists. Amugu's saber swept for him in a wide arc. Zheng Yan hit the flat of the blade with his gloved hand. His glove was cut-resistant, and he redirected Amugu's momentum, twisting the blade away.

Although there were no witnesses to this fight, as fellow assassins, it wouldn't be right for Wu Du to join Zheng Yan and fight two against one. He simply cheered from the sidelines. Zheng Yan left his sword sheathed at his side; he used the Drunken Fist Style instead, shuffling his feet in stagger-steps and swiping at Amugu as if intoxicated. Amugu had never seen boxing like this in his life, and he didn't know how to engage it.

"How strange," Zheng Yan remarked. "I thought Mister Amugu couldn't speak Han."

After a stunned moment, rage overtook Amugu. He was abruptly furious: This drunkard assassin insisted on humiliating him, almost landing several hits as he wove this way and that. Zheng Yan's fists and footwork incorporated many feints, which disoriented and confused him.

Yet Amugu was not the strongest warrior in Yuan for nothing. Realizing he would lose if he continued to approach this fight carelessly, he

observed and analyzed Zheng Yan's form. His saber flashed; in a blink, he switched from offense to defense, no longer chasing his opponent.

As soon as Amugu drew back, Wu Du sensed he was done underestimating them and rejoined the fray. He unsheathed Flashblade and, while Zheng Yan slid away in retreat, flicked his sword up toward Amugu's waist. Caught off guard, Amugu had no time to deflect the surprise attack. Wu Du sliced his scabbard cleanly in two, catching the severed piece as it fell and holding it up for Amugu to see. Amugu's face darkened. He hacked his saber down on Wu Du in retaliation.

The moment Wu Du joined the battle, Zheng Yan had withdrawn. Amugu's saber style was brutal and direct, relying on raw power; he aimed another heavy chop at Wu Du. Wu Du ducked the blow, then sprinted up the alley wall and somersaulted over Amugu's head. He aimed his stolen scabbard at Amugu's saber, attempting to sheathe the blade and swipe it away. Amugu jerked backward out of his reach.

Yet he still hesitated, unwilling to leave. Wu Du tossed the scabbard a few times in his hand and said, "Say I'm the best and I'll give it back."

With a furious roar, Amugu charged—but all at once, the alley filled with the pounding of booted footsteps: Soldiers of the Black-Plated Army patrolling the city had arrived.

"Who's fighting within the capital?!" demanded the captain.

If these Chen soldiers caught Amugu outright, it would be no laughing matter. No longer daring to tarry, he fled in haste, leaving Wu Du and Zheng Yan alone in the alley.

"Huben Imperial Guard and attendant of the crown prince, Zheng Yan," Zheng Yan announced.

"Officer Zheng, fighting is prohibited in the capital. Please surrender your weapon and come with me."

Zheng Yan cocked his head, looking the officer up and down. "Don't you fucking know who I am?! Surrender my weapon?!"

Wu Du gestured for him to be silent and stepped forward to present Li Yanqiu's imperial edict. With this, the matter was settled, and the guards were forced to move along.

“Outrageous. A bunch of arrogant brutes with complete disregard for the order of things!” Zheng Yan exclaimed.

The Black-Plated Army had always been arrogant, and it was also true that they acted with disregard for any outside their own ranks, going so far as to search Wu Du when he’d entered the imperial palace. But their leader Xie You was a hard and obstinate man, and therefore no one could touch his soldiers.

“Amugu’s skills are exceptional,” remarked Wu Du. “In single combat, either of us would be hard-pressed to defeat him.”

“So, where’re the goods?” asked Zheng Yan.

“We’ve wasted too much time here already. Here are the registers,” Wu Du said, presenting the stack. “I’ll keep the list of names. Talk later—gotta go!”

Duan Ling waited and waited, yet Wu Du failed to appear. *Did something happen?* he wondered absently. But what could happen in the capital? The alley before the pavilion had already emptied out; only Mu Qing now stood waiting with him. Darkness had begun to thicken at the tail end of twilight, and the air still had a chilly bite this early in spring.

He couldn’t keep Mu Qing standing around with him forever. “Let’s go back for now,” Duan Ling said.

Ultimately, it wasn’t Changliu-jun who came to pick them up, but the Mu family’s steward. As they headed home, Mu Qing told him, “Dad said we’ll all have dinner together tonight. Wu Du might already be there waiting for us.”

“I’ll stop by my courtyard and change first,” Duan Ling said.

“I’ll wait for you.” Now that he’d finished the exam, a great weight seemed to have been lifted from Mu Qing’s shoulders; he was happy as a clam. “After dinner let’s go out and have some fun. Changliu-jun already made a reservation for us at the new Qunfang Pavilion.”

Duan Ling was at a loss for words. Though he was buzzing with worry, seeing Mu Qing so carefree made him wish he felt the same. When he remembered his career as a student was now over, Mu Qing’s happiness

started to rub off on him—it was only Wu Du's absence that killed the mood.

While Duan Ling changed his robes, Mu Qing poked around the courtyard. It was the first time he'd explored Duan Ling and Wu Du's home in depth, and he was curious about everything. He pulled out each of Wu Du's drawers only to find them full of dried medicinal herbs.

Duan Ling was searching for a clean set of robes when the sound of the drawers sliding made him turn his head.

"You live in the same room as Wu Du?" Mu Qing asked.

Duan Ling hummed an affirmative.

"And you sleep together too?"

Duan Ling hummed again, wondering if Wu Du would agree to come to Qunfang Pavilion. Maybe they could have a drink together. Then, afterward, they could dismiss the servants, and he and Wu Du would be left alone in the room. Suddenly, he had another thought: Did Mu Qing know something? Was that why he'd invited them there? His face immediately heated.

It was full dark by the time a masked figure scaled the courtyard walls, peering through the windows into the brightly lit hall below.

Standing in the lamplight, Mu Qing had just slid open another medicine box to see what was inside when a rope shot in and coiled around his neck. Before he could make a sound, the rope yanked him toward the window. The box crashed to the floor, spilling dried herbs everywhere.

Duan Ling was tying his sash in the side hall when he heard the clatter. He whipped around in shock to see Mu Qing gasping for breath with a rope around his neck. Duan Ling sprinted in, unsheathed the paring knife on the table used for cutting medicinal ingredients, and sliced through the rope.

As Mu Qing tumbled to the ground, the masked figure charged Duan Ling, who flung the knife at him.

The masked man tilted his head, letting the small blade swish past his ear. Duan Ling ran straight for the medicine box. The masked man's blade hacked down into his path, and Duan Ling somersaulted out of range. The

box of poison was too far away. Cornered, Duan Ling stepped on the table and leapt for his bow, then turned and fired a single shot.

The masked man pelted back out of the hall.

“Who’s there!” Duan Ling yelled.

Another masked figure stabbed for his shoulder from behind—but his sword didn’t pierce flesh, stopped short by the Radiant White Tiger Armor under Duan Ling’s clothes. His assailant froze for the briefest moment in surprise. Before Duan Ling could turn around, the man struck his neck with the edge of his hand, and Duan Ling’s world went black.

“Two of them?” the masked man in the courtyard asked, looking down at the unconscious Duan Ling. “What do we do?”

“Take them both,” said the one who’d jumped in through the window.

The first attacker loosened the rope around Mu Qing’s neck to prevent it from strangling him while the other hefted Duan Ling onto his back. The pair ran from Wu Du’s courtyard out into the night.

Wu Du arrived outside Chengjun Pavilion to find it empty save for an old man cleaning up the grounds. When asked, the old man said he didn’t know anyone named Wang Shan, or where he had gone. Wu Du’s temper flared at the answer. He had no choice but to return to the military headquarters and lead Skychaser out of the stables.

“I heard you were fighting in the streets?” Xie You asked as he passed.

“Piss off!” Wu Du snapped, vaulting onto the steed and vanishing in the blink of an eye, leaving Xie You speechless.

Wu Du galloped all the way home.

“Shan-er!” he called from their courtyard gates.

No one answered him. Spotting his paring knife lying in front of the flowerbed, Wu Du sensed at once that something was amiss. He ran inside to see a mess of dried herbs on the ground and traces of a struggle—two strangers, he thought. He glanced toward the window ledge, frowning deeply, before sprinting back out through the gates into the alleyway,

following a set of muddy footprints. But even these disappeared after a few yards.

It was at this point that Changliu-jun strolled up.

“Where are Wang Shan and Mu Qing?” he asked. “They’re waiting for them to start dinner.”

Wu Du’s face was blank with shock. Confused, Changliu-jun stepped into the courtyard. He took one look around and immediately dashed back out. The two of them stood in the alley, staring at each other with eyes full of fear.

Duan Ling woke to voices speaking a strange language. After a moment, he recognized it as Khwarazmian. Dazed, he blinked his eyes open but saw nothing but darkness. He wasn’t sure whether Mu Qing was still with him or not. One of the kidnappers’ voices sounded familiar, though he couldn’t quite place where he’d heard it before.

Slowly, he realized there was a black sack over his head. Dim light showed through the cloth. Straining his ears, he heard the distant noise of girls giggling.

“Which of them’s the one?”

“Ask him.”

“He’ll figure out who we are.”

“We already took him. Wu Du will know it’s us. The only concern is asking the wrong one; then they’ll both find out.”

“Then let’s confirm their identities first.”

It struck Duan Ling then—his assailants were the Mongol envoys. Now he recognized the voice of Khatanbaatar, whom he’d heard speak in the imperial garden. Why had they kidnapped *him*? It couldn’t be that his plan had failed and they had discovered his true identity. That would be impossible. And though Duan Ling had seen Khatanbaatar once before, Khatanbaatar had never seen him. The Mongols, under the impression Duan Ling couldn’t understand them, spoke without the tiniest bit of concern—except Duan Ling had recognized them immediately.

“You’re too careless,” Khatanbaatar admonished his companion. “How could you hide such an important thing in your scabbard?”

“How could I know he would steal my scabbard?”

“Do you think you were being watched?”

“For now, think of what to say to him so we can get out of here. They’ll trace us here before we know it.”

“This one here is Mu Kuangda’s son, I’m sure of it,” the other man said to Khatanbaatar. “Look, he’s wearing this chainmail.”

A hand pulled aside Duan Ling’s outer robe to display the Radiant White Tiger Armor beneath.

“You’re right. Only the prime minister’s son would wear something like this for protection,” Khatanbaatar agreed. “No servant of Wu Du’s could get his hands on something so precious.”

“Search him,” the other man said. “See if he’s got anything on him that can verify his identity.”

The hand reached further into Duan Ling’s robe and began groping around. *You’re really asking for it*, Duan Ling thought.

Right on cue, a sharp cry pierced the air—Wu Du’s centipede had bitten Khatanbaatar as he felt under Duan Ling’s clothes. Clutching his hand, he dropped to the floor on the spot.

“Khatan!” the other man cried in alarm.

So it is him…

Duan Ling stifled a laugh. All of a sudden, he felt bad for these two stupid kidnappers.

Chapter 106

“THE ANTIDOTE! Quick, look for the antidote!”

The second kidnapper yanked Duan Ling up by the collar. Switching to Han, he demanded, “What’s your name?”

“Who cares what my name is,” Duan Ling said, still unable to see. “Your buddy’s life is in my hands. If you want the antidote, release my friend.”

Khatanbaatar wailed in the background, his cries growing weaker and weaker until he made no sound at all.

“He won’t die immediately,” Duan Ling said. “You still have a little time to consider letting my friend go. Or you could stick your hand in to look around yourself and get bitten too.”

“Give me the antidote, or I’ll kill you,” the man threatened. “Your neck isn’t protected by that armor.”

“I don’t have the antidote.” Duan Ling laughed from within the black cloth sack. “Make your decision.”

There was momentary silence. “Time waits for no one,” Duan Ling added. “You might only have a few hours.”

“You go,” the kidnapper huffed. “Your friend stays with me. If you dare breathe a word of this, I’ll slit his throat. You have eight hours—until sunrise—to bring back what was stolen from us.”

“What are your conditions?”

“After sunrise, no need to come back. We will all go die in honor than disgrace together,” the kidnapper said. “Tell Wu Du—”

“It’s ‘go down,’” Duan Ling corrected helpfully. “Either ‘we’ll all go down together’ or ‘we’d rather die in honor than live in disgrace.’”

“Got it, thanks,” the kidnapper said. “I want them back—the records and the other thing he took from me. Bring them to the pier outside the city along with the antidote. Leave them on the ground beside the third dock.”

Outside the city—was that where they were now? Duan Ling's thoughts raced. "Wouldn't it be more convenient for you to let my friend go too?"

"No can do," said the kidnapper. "I'm offering you one chance. It doesn't matter whether my subordinate lives or dies."

"Hey, slow down," Duan Ling said. "He's only poisoned. His ears still work."

The kidnapper snorted, then hoisted Duan Ling under his arm. "Let's go."

Wind whistled in Duan Ling's ears as the kidnapper burst through the doors. Outside, he heard the sound of festivities in the distance, which slowly faded as the kidnapper kept moving. Duan Ling had been trying to figure out where he was the whole time. He identified what nearby sounds he could as he was jostled along, his kidnapper sometimes carrying him over walls, sometimes striding across flat ground. Carriage bells jingled nearby.

"If you keep going around in circles like this wasting time, it'll only bring your subordinate closer to death," Duan Ling said.

"You're smart," the kidnapper sneered. "Go on then."

The rope binding Duan Ling's hands went slack. When the black sack was pulled from his head, Duan Ling found himself standing in an alley. Slowly, he stepped out into the main streets of Jiang Prefectural City, his kidnapper having vanished into the spring night without a trace.

"Give Amugu back the registers," Changliu-jun said outside the prime minister's manor. "His Majesty's already seen them anyway."

"They're with Zheng Yan," Wu Du said. "And he presented them to His Majesty earlier this evening. We'd have to go and ask for them back. Give me a minute. Don't panic."

After another moment of thought, Wu Du came to a decision. "Guard the entrance of the post house," he told Changliu-jun. "Keep an eye on them and make sure they don't move the hostages. I'll go find Zheng Yan. Once I

get the registers back, I'll go and talk terms with them. Take care not to alarm Prime Minister Mu with this matter while I'm gone."

"Are you crazy? How can you keep something like this from him?!"

"You tell him, then. But don't blame me for what comes afterward."

"You… Wu Du! Hey, Wu Du!"

Ignoring Changliu-jun, Wu Du leapt onto Skychaser and raced for the imperial palace at a mad gallop.

Mu Kuangda, still waiting for his son and Duan Ling to join him for dinner, sent more servants over to the courtyard to hurry them along.

"The young master dragged Wang Shan to Qunfang Pavilion," Changliu-jun told them after racking his brain for an excuse. "I was just about to head there to collect them. Please tell the prime minister to go ahead without them."

As soon as the servants were gone, he led a second horse out of the stables and rode hard for the post house.

Duan Ling didn't head back to the prime minister's manor. It was bound to be in a state of total mayhem from his and Mu Qing's disappearance. The second he walked in, Mu Kuangda was sure to take him aside and interrogate him, and he would be forced to stay in the manor for his own safety. At that point, there would be nothing he could do—he had to come up with a plan first.

The Mongols must've discovered Wu Du's investigation of their bribery. They'd risked kidnapping him so they could demand the evidence in exchange and cover their tracks. The man who'd taken him had seemed tall and muscular. Was it that warrior, Amugu? And other than evidence of the Mongols' bribes—those must be the records he'd asked for—what else had Wu Du taken that was so important?

A hand came down on his shoulder from behind. Jolting in alarm, Duan Ling spun to block the attack.

"Teacher!" Changliu-jun cried.

Duan Ling nearly jumped out of his skin with fright.

“Where’s Mu Qing?” Changliu-jun asked.

“Taken by Amugu and Khatanbaatar,” Duan Ling said, forcing himself to breathe. He still wasn’t quite used to the idea of being called *teacher*.

After relaying what had happened to Changliu-jun, Duan Ling offered him a few words of reassurance. When he learned in turn that Mu Kuangda was still unaware of Mu Qing’s disappearance, Duan Ling nodded. *Good. We still have a chance to fix this.*

“We have to hurry,” Changliu-jun said. “Wu Du went to the imperial palace to look for Zheng Yan. He’ll be here any minute.”

They continued to the post house to keep an eye on what was happening within.

“I don’t think he’s here,” Duan Ling admitted. “But Amugu took me in circles around the city earlier and clearly didn’t leave.”

“I’m going to take a look inside. Wait for me here.” Changliu-jun paused for a thought, and then—afraid some new disaster would unfold—amended: “Let’s go together. Climb on my back.”

Changliu-jun was extremely tall. Duan Ling jumped onto his back, and he leapt into the post house’s courtyard. They first barged into the Tanguts’ courtyard by accident; a girl screamed inside, and Changliu-jun quickly yanked Duan Ling out of the women’s bath. He gave Duan Ling a boost, letting him step on his bent knee to climb the wall. The two of them jumped down into the Mongols’ courtyard.

This guy’s got skill and guts, barging in like this, Duan Ling thought.

“Who’s there?” a guard called out.

The Mongols’ courtyard was well-guarded; the second Duan Ling and Changliu-jun dropped over the wall, they were surrounded. Bracing one hand on the floor, Changliu-jun flipped upside down and swept his legs out in a spinning kick. A guard spat blood before collapsing to the ground. Changliu-jun grabbed his saber and threw it at Duan Ling. “Can you use this?”

“A bow!” Duan Ling yelled back. “I need a bow!”

Changliu-jun delivered another flying kick that smashed the window into pieces. He barged into the side hall, scooped up a bow and quiver, and tossed them to Duan Ling. The hall was completely empty.

“He’s not here,” said Duan Ling. “This place is too obvious. Let’s go; we’ll think of a way to find him.”

They turned and saw their path to the gate blocked by a dozen or so Mongol guards.

“Back over the wall?” Duan Ling said after a pause.

“No need,” Changliu-jun told him. He slipped a finger under his cloth mask and drew it down, revealing his tattoo to the guards. “I’ll give you all one last chance before I shed your blood. Those who are wise would do well to let us pass.”

The Mongols didn’t appear to understand what he was saying. They raised their weapons and charged with a cry. Changliu-jun angled his shoulders and took them head-on, slipping through their formation. Duan Ling jumped back, landing atop the table with his bow at the ready, prepared to provide support—but by the time he reached back for an arrow and nocked it, Changliu-jun was the only one standing.

Duan Ling was struck speechless.

“Let’s go, Teacher.” Changliu-jun reached out to help him down from the table. As Duan Ling left the post house, he couldn’t help casting a glance at the bodies on the floor in astonishment.

They stepped back out onto a quiet street.

“Where could he be?” Changliu-jun asked, crouching atop a stone guardian lion. Clad in his black stealth robes, he looked like a second beast perched on the lion’s head.

“Maybe we should get the Black-Plated Army to search the city?” Duan Ling suggested.

“I’m worried the young master’s in imminent danger,” Changliu-jun replied. “What if they decide to kill him?”

It was Duan Ling who’d devised this whole scheme, but now he found he’d shot himself in the foot. If he had known, he would have been more careful. Now they’d driven the Mongols to take desperate measures.

The sound of galloping hooves grew louder: Wu Du had arrived from the palace.

“Wu Du!”

He vaulted off Skychaser’s back, running for Duan Ling. They caught each other in a fierce embrace.

Wu Du heaved a sigh of relief. “Thank goodness you’re not hurt. Thank heavens.”

“They still have Mu Qing!” Changliu-jun said.

“Let’s talk somewhere else,” Wu Du replied. “Zheng Yan’s still inside the palace, taking care not to alarm His Majesty. He told us to wait at the noodle shop; he’ll find a way to bring us the goods.”

Although Changliu-jun was fretting over Mu Qing, he still didn’t know where he’d been taken. Either way, he wasn’t at the post house, so he accompanied the others to World’s Best Noodle Shop. The shop was just about to close, but the owner, recognizing them as friends of Zheng Yan, tidied up the private rooms on the second floor and let them wait for him inside.

Duan Ling relayed the events of the night for a second time to Wu Du, and the three of them sank into pensive silence.

“What did you take from him?” Duan Ling asked.

Wu Du looked genuinely lost as he set Amugu’s scabbard on the table.

“This?” said Changliu-jun. “You and Zheng Yan beat him up, fine. But what’re you doing stealing people’s scabbards?”

“I needed something as evidence!” Wu Du protested. “Or what would I present to His Majesty?”

“No, wait,” said Duan Ling. “It’s just a scabbard. Why would he go so far to get it back?”

“Maybe it has special meaning to him,” Wu Du suggested.

The scabbard did look precious, set as it was with jewels. Perhaps it was a reward from Ögedei, or even an heirloom.

“Well, we can’t just let the man die,” Changliu-jun said. “Do you have the antidote?”

“I’ll make it now,” Wu Du replied. He unbuckled a steel belt inside his robes, opening a secret powder compartment and taking a measure out with a minuscule scoop. He began assembling the antidote and asked the shop owner for a spoon. Changliu-jun, still trying to work out where the kidnappers could be hiding Mu Qing, peppered him with questions while he worked but received few responses in return. Duan Ling knew Wu Du must’ve wanted to pack up, go home, and call it a day. From his perspective, the kidnappers had already let Duan Ling go, and Mu Qing wasn’t his problem. All he was doing by staying here was watching Changliu-jun wear himself out worrying.

While the assassins conversed in the background, Duan Ling examined the saber’s scabbard, thinking again of Kublai’s sword. It seemed the Mongols had a habit of embedding precious gemstones in their scabbards as a display of status. He picked it up for closer examination and felt a switch depress under his finger; a secret compartment popped open, revealing two papers yellowed with age.

Wu Du and Changliu-jun’s conversation ground to a halt. Both looked over at the scabbard.

“What’s this?” Duan Ling pressed a finger against the edge of the compartment, gingerly slid the sheets of paper free, and unfolded them on the table. His own handwriting stared back at him—the hidden pages were essays he and Cai Yan had written back at Biyong Academy, with each of their seals stamped at the end.

Wu Du and Changliu-jun huddled in around the papers, frowning in concentration as they examined them. When Wu Du saw Cai Yan’s seal, his expression darkened. He glanced over at Duan Ling, who was stricken with shock.

Crap! Duan Ling thought—Changliu-jun was right beside them.

“Third…month…opening…” Changliu-jun read, his brow creasing, before turning to Duan Ling. “What is this? What does it say?”

Wu Du and Duan Ling were both rendered speechless.

Chapter 107

"THESE ARE SECRET letters from Borjigin Batu and Ögedei," Duan Ling replied, holding the papers out to Changliu-jun. "Give them to the prime minister."

Changliu-jun didn't move to take them. "You're the one who found them. Hand them over yourself."

"All right," Wu Du agreed, tucking the exam papers away.

"What do we do now?" Changliu-jun said. "We have to think of something, right? If the prime minister finds out about this, we're done for."

That was a close one, Wu Du and Duan Ling both thought, though Duan Ling's expression showed no change. Only his brow furrowed faintly as he contemplated in silence.

Zheng Yan trotted up the stairs, bringing a breeze in with him. He settled down beside them and placed an oilpaper-wrapped package on the table. Lang Junxia ambled in after him.

"All the gift registers are here," Zheng Yan said.

Once again, Duan Ling was confronted with Lang Junxia. He tensed in spite of himself, while Wu Du frowned and asked, "Why'd you tell *him*?"

"He stole the goods from the Eastern Palace for me," Zheng Yan said.

"Where's the scabbard?" Lang Junxia asked.

Duan Ling's back was covered in cold sweat, made chilly by the brisk wind. Wu Du motioned toward the scabbard on the table, and Lang Junxia's gaze shifted down. He reached out and laid his hand upon it, but didn't take a seat; instead, with a soft *click,* he unlatched the hidden compartment.

It was empty.

Four pairs of eyes fixed on the silent Lang Junxia. Changliu-jun sensed something amiss; confusion appeared in the eyes peering out over his mask. He glanced over at Wu Du, then at Duan Ling.

“Oho,” Zheng Yan murmured. “What sort of ruse is this?”

The shadow of a smile passed over Lang Junxia’s face as he returned the scabbard to its place.

“Where are they keeping Mu Qing?” Zheng Yan asked Duan Ling.

“I…don’t know,” Duan Ling replied. “It wasn’t outside the city, in any case. I heard girls’ laughter, and I could see bright lights through the sack they had over my head, like…like…”

An epiphany struck Duan Ling. Remembering Mu Qing’s original plans for the night, he mused aloud, “Could it be Qunfang Pavilion?”

The assassins stared at him, waiting for his decision—after all, he was the one who’d been kidnapped.

“Let’s look there first,” Duan Ling said. “We split into two groups. The first will go to Qunfang Pavilion, and the second will take the registers and scabbard to the third dock, then follow Amugu to see where he goes. You… Wuluohou Mu, you and Zheng Yan head for the dock. Wu Du, Changliu-jun, and I will search for Mu Qing. Is that all right?”

With another faint smile, Lang Junxia turned and left without a word.

“I’ll leave it to you, then,” Zheng Yan said agreeably. He leapt over the railing and disappeared into the night.

Duan Ling released a sigh of relief when Lang Junxia was gone, then glanced over at Wu Du. Wu Du waved a hand reassuringly—but it was Changliu-jun, of all people, who seemed most distracted.

When they arrived at the alley behind Qunfang Pavilion, Duan Ling leaned his ear toward the courtyard walls, trying to identify the sounds within. After listening a moment, he was even more sure of his guess.

“Here—I think this is the spot,” Duan Ling said.

There were plenty of servant boys and girls in Qunfang Pavilion; finding one young man hidden away in a bedroom would be difficult.

“We’ll split up and go room to room,” Wu Du said. “Changliu-jun, you check the first floor. We’ll check the second.”

While Amugu and Khatanbaatar were staying in Jiang Prefecture, they’d surely been frequent visitors of Qunfang Pavilion. What else would

foreign envoys do to pass the time in the Han capital? Wrestle in the courtyard every day? The more he thought about it, the more convinced Duan Ling became that he was correct. After telling Changliu-jun to wait for their signal, Wu Du wrapped an arm around Duan Ling's waist and clambered up the wall to the second floor.

"We aren't going to use the door?" Duan Ling whispered.

"Why bother? Let's find Mu Qing as fast as possible and get home to bed. Aren't you tired after writing that exam all day?"

Duan Ling had to concede the point. Wu Du scampered ahead, while Duan Ling clung to the window eaves and edged sideways as silently as possible, following him. Exasperated, Wu Du doubled back. "No one will notice if there's noise. It's not like we're eavesdropping outside the Grand Secretariat."

On a lazy, lethargic spring night like this, the occupants of the pleasure house would assume the occasional rattle on the tiles outside was a passing cat. Wu Du opened a window and checked inside; a courtesan was plucking at a zither while a scholar listened.

Qunfang Pavilion had been the largest brothel in Xichuan, and when the capital moved, it had followed along as well and re-established itself in Jiang Prefectural City. Following renovations, the space had become even more luxurious; there were now more than twenty deluxe rooms on the second floor. Duan Ling opened a window, too, and spied a corpulent official heaving for breath as he kissed a slender boy.

Duan Ling smothered a laugh. Wu Du waved at him to stop peeping. He opened a second window and motioned for Duan Ling to go check another.

Each window seemed to open onto another world, as if the rooms of Qunfang Pavilion held a specimen of every kind of person imaginable. Duan Ling approached one window and immediately blushed. He saw a fair-skinned man, lean and muscular, with a younger man in his embrace, caught in the throes of passion before a mirror. He was holding the younger man's leg up, and the place where they were joined was reflected clearly: The jade pestle pounding juices from the flower, white fluids spattering everywhere. The younger man was obviously enjoying himself as well, his chest and neck flushed as he panted for breath.

Duan Ling was so shocked he nearly yelped, ducking hurriedly under the window eaves. Wu Du, thinking Duan Ling had found something important, came over to look. His handsome face turned red at the sight, and he immediately slammed the window shut and pulled Duan Ling away.

Head filled with those images, Duan Ling tripped and almost slipped off the roof tiles. Wu Du caught him by the waist, and they looked at each other awkwardly.

“Car—careful,” Wu Du stammered.

“Um…” Duan Ling steadied himself, but when he felt a bulge in Wu Du’s pants pressing against him, he hurriedly put some space between them. His heart raced.

“Over here,” Wu Du said.

“Right.”

Wu Du tugged open another window, motioning for Duan Ling to wait outside.

A dark silhouette lay on the bed. Duan Ling knew at a glance it must be Mu Qing—after all, why would anyone be asleep in Qunfang Pavilion at this hour? He jumped down into the room after Wu Du and peeled away the blanket to find Mu Qing lying next to the unconscious Khatanbaatar. Mu Qing was sleeping soundly, apparently uninjured. Whether it was because Amugu feared Wu Du would seek revenge or out of the kindness of his heart, he hadn’t done him any real harm.

“Do we save the envoy?” Duan Ling asked—thinking that since the kidnappers hadn’t harmed Mu Qing, they shouldn’t let Khatanbaatar die either.

“Even if we wanted to save him, I don’t have the antidote,” Wu Du said. “I gave everything to Zheng Yan.”

Duan Ling leaned out the window and whistled, the signal that they’d found Mu Qing. Changliu-jun appeared in a twinkling and climbed over the sill. Upon seeing Mu Qing lying motionless, he was frightened out of his wits; he pressed down on the dip above Mu Qing’s lip to wake him, then took a cup of tea and tried to tip some into his mouth.

“Look—what’s wrong with him?!” he asked.

“He’s fine,” Duan Ling assured him. “Just unconscious.”

Sure enough, Mu Qing woke a few moments later. “Huh? Changliu-jun?”

Everyone was struck speechless.

“Wang Shan? Wu Du?” Mu Qing looked around. “Where are we… Qunfang Pavilion? Why are you guys here so early?”

Duan Ling had to hand it to him: While everyone had been worried sick, scared for his safety most of the night, Mu Qing had been dreaming peacefully. Changliu-jun watched anxiously while Wu Du checked Mu Qing over to make certain he hadn’t been poisoned; thus assured, he scooped him up to leave with an attitude that brooked no protest.

“I can walk myself!” Mu Qing struggled in Changliu-jun’s hold. “Let’s go next door and have a drink, eh? Wait! I’m still not—”

Wu Du and Duan Ling both clapped a hand to their foreheads, exasperated.

“You scared us half to death!” Changliu-jun furiously harangued him. “And you still want to drink? We’re leaving! We’re going home to be punished together!”

“Use the door! Why are you going out the window?!” Mu Qing said as he kicked his feet in the air, still trapped in Changliu-jun’s iron grip.

Duan Ling burst into laughter at the sight. He turned back and covered Khatanbaatar with the blanket before leaving with Wu Du. Whether Khatanbaatar survived or not would depend on Amugu.

“How was your exam?” Wu Du asked, finally relaxed enough to engage in small talk.

“It was all right,” Duan Ling said with a smile. “I’m now light as a bird.”

His lifetime of arduous studying had come to an end. If he made it through and then passed the palace examination in the future, he would become an official; if not, he’d have to come up with some other strategy.

“Well, what did you want to ask me for?” Wu Du said.

They left the private room and entered a hall dazzling with lights, where Qunfang Pavilion's maidens danced accompanied by the melodious strains of the pipa. Duan Ling's face colored again as he recalled the thoughts he'd had that day—and then the scene he'd just spied through the windows.

"N-nothing. Let's go home," he said, his flush spreading down to his neck. He was about to turn when Wu Du stopped him.

"Let's have a drink," he said, eyes twinkling.

"Um…" Duan Ling licked his lips. Wu Du's cheeks were pink, though he hadn't had a single drink yet. He peered into the rooms nearby. "There might still be space."

Duan Ling's heart was pounding. Wu Du bade him wait and descended the stairs to speak to the madam about booking a room on the second floor. Duan Ling silently fretted. *Don't tell me we're going to… How did Wu Du know what I was thinking?*

"The second floor is all booked!" Wu Du called up to him from below. "Come down here."

Duan Ling ran downstairs, still blushing. The girls ascending the stairs looked at him curiously, and one tried to loop her arm through his. Duan Ling raised his hands to dodge her and bounded down the rest of the way, embarrassed.

A serving boy came up to conduct them to a seat, asking, "One room for each of the two gentlemen? Or shall I make other arrangements?"

"We just want to listen to music," Wu Du said. "Put up a screen. We'll listen to the pipa playing; there's no need to prepare anything but some snacks. We haven't had dinner."

Duan Ling was reminded of Qionghua House in Shangjing—this place was similar. The server dusted the divan off for them, moved over a screen, and served food without asking the girls to come and drink with them. Duan Ling immediately felt much more at ease.

Wu Du sniffed the jar of wine. "Switch this out for a fresh one."

"One tael of silver per jar," the man answered. "And we only accept cash up front, sir."

Wu Du stared at him pointedly, without saying a word.

Duan Ling tugged on Wu Du's sleeve, finding it amusing. The server shivered at the murderous look in Wu Du's eyes; he picked up the jar and left, grumbling the whole while as he switched out the wine.

"What kind of shoddy service is this?" Wu Du sneered.

Duan Ling had no words.

They sat facing each other. As the sound of the pipa faded, someone shouted, "Well played!" and another came forward to reward the girl with a tip. Duan Ling poked his head out from behind the screen to see just how pretty the pipa player was. When she saw his handsome, refined features, she smiled and threw him a wink before putting away her pipa and gliding away.

Now Wu Du was the one left speechless.

"This is the first time I've sat in the hall of Qunfang Pavilion," Duan Ling said. "It's pretty nice."

"Come over here; stop staring."

Duan Ling returned to Wu Du's side and settled down next to him on the divan. Once the wine was refreshed, some simple stir-fry dishes and snacks were served. Duan Ling had been hungry all day; the only thing he'd eaten was a cold lunch. "Eat," Wu Du urged him, and he wasted no time digging in.

Wu Du didn't lift his own chopsticks, serving Duan Ling instead. Duan Ling found himself wondering how Zheng Yan and Lang Junxia were faring down on the windy docks, surrounded by darkness, and how the poisoned Mongol was doing on the second floor.

"Why aren't you eating?" Duan Ling had finally noticed Wu Du's chopsticks remained untouched. He picked up a cup and said, "Here, I'll toast you."

Wu Du nearly laughed in disbelief at the sight of Duan Ling, who—despite the fact that he was starving and wolfing down food—had nonetheless stopped to raise a cup to him. After tossing back the warmed wine, Duan Ling returned to his meal. A moment later, he felt thirsty again, so he removed the lid and drank straight from the lip of the jar.

Sated at last, Duan Ling said, “Should we go see how Zheng Yan and the others are doing?”

“Who cares about them?” Wu Du said. “More wine?”

“No more,” Duan Ling said with a long sigh. “If I keep drinking, I’ll really get drunk.”

“It’s all right, I’ll carry you home. I wanted to take you out drinking on your birthday. You’re an adult now, and you’ve already finished your exam. Why shouldn’t I take you out to have fun?”

Duan Ling, tipsy, leaned into Wu Du.

Suddenly nervous, Wu Du hesitantly raised his arm, hovering for a moment—but in the end, he wrapped it around Duan Ling.

“Hey, Wu Du. Let’s go upstairs.”

“Upstairs?” Wu Du immediately guessed what he meant, and his face flushed red. “I-it’s full upstairs… Why don’t we go home instead?”

Duan Ling clung to Wu Du’s arm and nuzzled his head into his shoulder. He tilted his chin up to look at him, eyes hazy from the wine, his lips parted as if about to speak.

The other guests in Qunfang Pavilion cast swaying shadows upon the screen, and the lights outside filtered through, washing the two of them in color. The pipa sounded again, this time playing “Parting at Yang Pass.”

“*The morning rain dampens the Wei City dust, the willows of the guest house tenderly green*…”

“Shaoye, this way, please.”

“So the party’s moved here? Where’s that brat from the Mu family?” came a familiar voice.

“He should’ve arrived some time ago,” a man said. “Please have a seat, Shaoye.”

Cai Yan, in the company of a gaunt, scholarly looking man, walked around the screen. Duan Ling was still drunk, and Wu Du was also caught completely off guard. The two parties stared at each other until Cai Yan exclaimed, “Wu-qing?”

Wu Du's smile vanished. He was so shocked he forgot to stand up and offer a proper greeting.

Cai Yan sank onto another low divan, smiling. "Mu Qing asked me to come here and meet his good friend. I didn't think it would be…"

He snapped to alertness as he met Duan Ling's gaze.

"…you," he murmured, the color draining from his face.

"It's me." Duan Ling, instantly sober, straightened up, sitting cross-legged. He retrieved the jar of wine and poured a cup. "Your Highness, allow me to toast you."

Cai Yan and Duan Ling gazed at each other in silence.

On the other side of the screen, the pipa player plucked her instrument and crooned, "*Drink another cup of wine, for there'll be no old friends west of Yang Pass…*"

Chapter 108

A SINGLE LAMP hanging on the pier, swaying in the river breeze, offered the only source of light in the darkness. The river lapped at the shore. Lang Junxia and Zheng Yan hid behind the shoal rocks a slight distance away, observing the wooden docks.

A small bundle waited at the end of the pier.

Out of nowhere, Zheng Yan laughed. “You know, I feel like the way Wang Shan speaks is very similar to someone I once knew.”

Lang Junxia said nothing. Crossing his arms in front of his chest, he continued to observe the pier. Nearly half an hour had passed, yet nobody had come to retrieve the ransom.

They fell into silence again, standing stiff as wooden carvings.

Without warning, a sopping-wet man burst from the surface of the water. He propped himself on the pier with one arm and, with a single swipe of his hand, hauled the package backward with him into the river. Startled, Zheng Yan and Lang Junxia darted over, but they were already too late—the man had disappeared into the river. Zheng Yan slipped and fell in his haste, splashing into the water, while Lang Junxia chased them from along the riverbank.

In the hall of Qunfang Pavilion, scenes of the past seemed to rise before both Cai Yan and Duan Ling’s eyes.

It was as if they’d returned to that spring when peach blossoms bloomed in Shangjing. Back to the days when they traversed the corridors of Ming Academy, greeting each other by bowing and wrapping one hand over the other thumb whenever they crossed paths; back to the nights when they practiced the Mountain and River Sword Style with Li Jianhong; back to the days when the city fell, and screams split the air and blood ran over the cobblestones. Back, too, to the moment Cai Yan had lifted his brother’s shroud, his eyes brimming with fear and helplessness.

That very same fear once again flooded Cai Yan's heart. His stomach twisted with nerves, and he knocked over the empty wine cup in front of him.

Duan Ling observed him quietly. With every passing moment Cai Yan grew more and more frightened, as if the young man seated before him was a ghost—a specter embodying Li Jianhong's spirit roaring in fury and the scorn of the people of Great Chen, come to take his life.

His fear did not escape Duan Ling's eyes. *But what is he afraid of?*

Abruptly, Duan Ling realized the source of Cai Yan's fear and almost laughed aloud. Knowing Cai Yan, he couldn't possibly be afraid of Duan Ling. No—Cai Yan was afraid of his father. Were there still people in this world genuinely afraid of the dead? It seemed his father's might hadn't dissipated with his death, but instead became an invisible force, sharp as a knife, piercing Cai Yan's soul and pinning it to his gravestone.

"Your Highness, please," Duan Ling said, smiling. He nudged Wu Du with his elbow.

The scholar who had arrived alongside Cai Yan said coldly, "I see this friend is polite, at least."

Wu Du picked up their wine jar, and the scholar followed suit, each pouring for the young man beside him. Wu Du gathered himself and addressed Cai Yan. "Your Highness, this is my adopted son, Wang Shan."

"W-Wang Shan," Cai Yan said, a tremor in his voice. "*You're* Wang Shan."

"Allow me to drink it in your place, Your Highness," the scholar said.

Duan Ling raised his cup, and the scholar drained his on behalf of Cai Yan. The party settled into a protracted silence. Even the scholar felt the strangeness of the atmosphere. "Your Highness, are you not feeling well?"

Cai Yan longed to flee. He squeezed out an answer: "The wind was cold earlier; my…stomach hurts."

How tough for you, having to come up with an excuse to weasel your way out of this, Duan Ling thought. As he laid eyes on Cai Yan again, his initial shock flashed over into anger. He wanted to get a few more jabs in—but just as he was about to speak, a commotion arose outside.

“Don’t let him escape!”

Stunned, Duan Ling recognized Zheng Yan’s voice.

Had Amugu returned? Almost immediately, there was a loud *bang* from the second floor, followed by the man himself crashing through the railing and falling down into the central hall. Wu Du and the scholar—shielding Duan Ling and Cai Yan respectively—sprang apart, and Wu Du drew his sword. In the next moment, another figure somersaulted through the air and kicked their screen toward Amugu. It broke over the Mongol man, splintering into pieces.

Duan Ling backed away from Cai Yan, staying behind Wu Du for protection. Charging forward, Amugu kicked the scholar aside and grabbed Cai Yan, laying his knife against Cai Yan’s neck. The man who’d kicked the screen straightened—Lang Junxia, with a dripping Zheng Yan following close behind him. As soon as they saw Cai Yan with the blade to his throat, their faces went pale.

“Name your terms,” Lang Junxia said. “Stop wasting time.”

Amugu could never have imagined he’d catch such a lucky break after falling over the railing; with a start, he realized he’d managed to grab the crown prince of Southern Chen.

“Interesting,” Amugu said, laughing. “So it’s you.”

He tightened his grip on the knife, its edge glinting in the lamplight as he pressed the flat of the blade down on Cai Yan’s throat, stopping him from breathing. Everyone else stared at Amugu’s hand; Cai Yan stared at Duan Ling.

“Name *your* terms. We’re all smart people here,” Amugu said.

The hall was quiet. No one dared make a sound.

It was Duan Ling who broke the silence. “Don’t make any sudden moves. Zheng Yan, go outside and prepare three horses for him. Is Khatanbaatar still here? Bring him down; put him on a horse.”

Lang Junxia and Zheng Yan glanced at one another. Zheng Yan nodded and left to make the preparations.

Surveying the scene before him, Lang Junxia realized Duan Ling and Cai Yan had crossed paths. He was first surprised, then uneasy; he met Cai

Yan's eyes and shook his head slightly. He would handle it.

"You." Amugu pointed at Wu Du. "Go over there, farther away."

Wu Du and Duan Ling obediently stepped aside to watch the show. Duan Ling's mind was racing. He had plenty to say, but he kept quiet.

After a few minutes, hurried footsteps sounded as another man came running into the hall. "Your High—what's going on?!"

Changliu-jun had arrived. As soon as he saw the standoff inside Qunfang Pavilion, he grasped the situation.

"Everyone, out!" Amugu barked.

The crowd backed away. Lang Junxia glanced between Cai Yan and Duan Ling, seeming to hesitate.

Amugu yelled again: "Out!"

The guests slowly retreated from the hall.

Silence fell once more. Duan Ling quickly put the pieces together: Zheng Yan and Lang Junxia must have been waiting at the pier when Amugu arrived to retrieve the package. After grabbing it, he'd likely rushed into the city and dashed across the rooftops back to Qunfang Pavilion. Sensing Lang Junxia and Zheng Yan were about to catch him, Amugu had taken desperate measures.

"The horses are ready," Zheng Yan said. "Now let him go."

The Four Great Assassins were all present. On one side stood Amugu and Cai Yan, a knife to his throat; on the other stood Duan Ling, with Wu Du, Lang Junxia, Changliu-jun, and Zheng Yan behind him.

How lucky for you, Cai Yan, that if you were killed now, it would be too difficult to deal with the aftermath, Duan Ling thought.

"Is Khatanbaatar here? Then take him out of the city," Duan Ling said.

Lowering his voice, he murmured to the assassins, "General Xie is guarding the city gate; he won't be able to get out. We'll take the lead. Let's go."

Qunfang Pavilion wasn't far from the city gates. They strode down the streets, with Duan Ling and the four assassins ahead and Amugu, Cai

Yan pulled in front of him in the saddle, riding at a safe distance behind. The scholar Cai Yan had come with followed as well.

“We’re betting our lives on you,” Zheng Yan muttered to Duan Ling. “If they take His Highness, we’ll have to flee the city.”

In all honesty, Duan Ling wished Amugu *would* take Cai Yan with him back up north so he could enjoy the sweet taste of Batu’s hospitality. But how could he explain to Li Yanqiu that he’d allowed the crown prince of Southern Chen to get kidnapped? If Cai Yan disappeared, it might be even more difficult for Duan Ling to prove his story.

Duan Ling glanced back and caught Changliu-jun asking the other three, “What happened?”

“No idea,” Duan Ling put in. “I was drinking in Qunfang Pavilion.”

“I don’t know either,” Wu Du replied. “I was drinking in Qunfang Pavilion too.”

“Amugu came to retrieve the package himself,” Zheng Yan said. He was still soaking wet, his robes clinging to his body. “But he was too quick; he disappeared before we could catch him.”

Lang Junxia stayed quiet, which confirmed Duan Ling’s suspicions.

“What are you doing back here?” Duan Ling asked Changliu-jun.

“The young master sent me to apologize to His Highness on his behalf, since he couldn’t meet him tonight,” Changliu-jun responded.

Duan Ling noticed blood oozing from Zheng Yan’s arm. “Are you all right?”

Zheng Yan dismissed his concern with a wave. The five of them had reached the city gate. Lang Junxia presented his token to the Black-Plated soldier standing guard. “The Eastern Palace has official business outside the city.”

Duan Ling asked to borrow a bow and quiver from the soldiers. Zheng Yan and Lang Junxia had just left the city earlier that evening; the soldiers didn’t bother searching them. Peering further down the road, they asked, “Who’s that behind you?”

“They’re with us,” Lang Junxia replied.

They passed through the gates. Amugu, still holding Cai Yan in a firm grip, followed a few dozen paces behind the group, unwilling to come any closer.

“Wuluohou Mu,” Duan Ling said. “Prepare a boat for him.”

Lang Junxia made his way to the riverbank as everyone waited.

“I’m going to relieve myself,” Duan Ling said, retreating into the darkness and looping back toward the river. Wu Du trailed after him. Working quickly, he tore a strip of cloth from his sleeve and scrawled with a piece of charcoal, *Greet this letter as if you greeted me*. He tied the fabric to the shaft of an arrow, shoved the arrow up his sleeve, and returned to the pier.

“Put Khatanbaatar in the boat,” Duan Ling ordered.

The scholar, who had followed them all the way out of the city gates, stood at a distance, looking between Duan Ling and the Four Great Assassins. Who was this young man that he could deliver orders to the most fearsome killers of the empire?

Amugu sneered. “It seems you’re the only one here with any brains.”

If you really want the crown prince, you can have him. Keep the change, thought Duan Ling. Aloud, he said, “Now you get in too.”

“Wait!” Zheng Yan blurted. “What are you doing? Give him back!”

Amugu hauled Cai Yan into the boat with him. Lang Junxia and Zheng Yan ran a few halting steps after them while Changliu-jun said, “No way. Wang Shan, don’t joke around!”

Don’t worry. I’m just trying to scare you guys. The second Amugu took up the pole and started to push away from the shore, Duan Ling shouted, “After him!”

Without a moment of hesitation, Amugu kicked Cai Yan into the river. Lang Junxia raced to the end of the pier and skidded to a halt, while Zheng Yan dove off it, plunging into the water again. Duan Ling had expected Amugu to throw Cai Yan into the water to buy himself time to get away; he wasn't afraid he'd actually try to abscond with him.

As Zheng Yan splashed into the water, Amugu shouted from afar: "Your crown prince is a fraud! You've all been deceived!"

Duan Ling was stunned.

Wu Du, Lang Junxia, Changliu-jun, and even the scholar who'd just caught up with them paled at this accusation. Not even Duan Ling had predicted Amugu would say such a thing outright.

Shaking off his distraction, Duan Ling remembered the arrow in his sleeve and shot it into the darkness like a trailing meteor. Whether it landed in the boat or fell away into the river, he couldn't tell.

Not long after, Zheng Yan climbed out of the water with Cai Yan slung over his shoulder, soaked to the skin. Lang Junxia and Changliu-jun rushed forward to check on him. "Are you all right, Your Highness?"

Duan Ling nudged Wu Du, urging him to at least pretend to do the same. Wu Du grudgingly went over and felt for Cai Yan's pulse.

"Your Highness," Duan Ling said. "My sincerest apologies. I deserve death for allowing you to be thrown into the river."

With no strength to speak, Cai Yan dismissed this with a wave, looking like a drowned rat. The scholar led his horse up. "Your Highness, please let me take you back to the palace."

Cai Yan said weakly, "You… You…"

"Your Highness?" the scholar asked.

"Feng Duo, take His Highness back at once. Don't let him catch a cold," Zheng Yan said.

"I'll be off as well," Lang Junxia said.

Chapter 109

EVERYONE ELSE WATCHED as Lang Junxia swung astride his horse and sped off into the darkness. Among the four, Zheng Yan was in the worst shape. This incident had had nothing to do with him, yet he'd ended up running around all night and getting injured—he'd even jumped into the river twice.

"Come with us. We'll get you bandaged up at my place," Duan Ling offered.

Zheng Yan hummed in response, seemingly deep in thought. Of the group, Duan Ling should've been the most disoriented, yet he noticed everyone else seemed to be out of it. Wu Du was carrying on as usual, but Changliu-jun and Zheng Yan both seemed to move as if sleepwalking.

Duan Ling patted Changliu-jun. "Hey, Changliu-jun? Are you all right?"

"Leave me alone!" Changliu-jun cried out, in obvious distress. He'd been frightened too many times in a row tonight, and felt wobbly on his feet. First Mu Qing had been kidnapped, leading him to fret for hours. Then the crown prince had been taken hostage. Lastly, before Amugu left, he'd dropped an earth-shattering bomb that put Changliu-jun in a state of extreme shock. Despite this, he asked no questions on the way back, and upon returning to the manor, went directly to Mu Kuangda to report without delay.

The situation was changing too quickly. Duan Ling had been drunk when he encountered Cai Yan at Qunfang Pavilion, but after standing in the river breeze for almost an hour, he was dead sober. Now that his head was clear, he felt a belated and lingering fear. He needed to sort everything out in his mind; an unmanageable number of things had happened in the course of one night.

Duan Ling showed Zheng Yan into their home, then went off to find some salve while their guest found himself a seat. Zheng Yan looked at Wu Du. "Give me some booze."

As they brushed past each other, Duan Ling took the opportunity to lay his hand on Wu Du's chest. Wu Du nodded, indicating the item was still secured there. He glanced at Zheng Yan. "I'll go and get some wine from the manor."

Zheng Yan had stripped down to the waist, exposing his fair skin and lean, muscular build, yet he remained deep in thought.

Duan Ling located the salve and knelt down beside him. "How'd you get injured?"

"Something cut me underwater," Zheng Yan answered absently, seeming slightly disconcerted.

Among the four assassins, Wu Du had hung back the entire time, Changliu-jun hadn't attacked, and Lang Junxia had visibly hesitated between Cai Yan and Duan Ling. Only Zheng Yan had expended great effort to rescue the supposed crown prince.

Why are you trying so hard? Duan Ling couldn't help but think. *What has Cai Yan ever done for you?*

But of course this was an unfair thought—Zheng Yan was merely doing his duty. Duan Ling had assumed Lang Junxia would be first to dive into the river to save Cai Yan, but to his surprise, Zheng Yan had jumped in without the slightest hesitation. Unexpectedly, Duan Ling found himself moved: Zheng Yan had saved Cai Yan's life, but in a way, the person he'd carried out of the water was Duan Ling.

Zheng Yan was still thinking, his brows drawn into a deep furrow. Duan Ling knew he must be stuck on what Amugu had shouted before he left. Had Zheng Yan, too, noticed something amiss? Duan Ling wasn't sure if this man had known his father or not, or whose side he was really on.

Duan Ling set to cleaning Zheng Yan's wound, which was white from soaking in the water, then took out a small plate and began mixing medicinal powder. Zheng Yan finally came to his senses and turned, staring at him dead-on.

"What did Amugu say at the end?" Zheng Yan asked without preamble. "I couldn't hear over the sound of the river when I came to the surface."

Duan Ling was silent for a moment, then replied, “I didn’t hear either. Take off your glove.”

Zheng Yan placed his hand on the table. Duan Ling slipped his fingers under the edge of his glove and peeled it off; the fabric was interwoven with fine metal wire to intercept hidden weapons or to catch a blade bare-handed. On the back of Zheng Yan’s hand was a tattoo made up of ancient inscriptions formed into the shape of a white tiger.

This tattoo again. Lang Junxia’s was on his arm, Wu Du’s was on his neck, and Changliu-jun’s was on his cheek.

When Zheng Yan saw Duan Ling examining his tattoo, he glanced up at him.

“It’s the same as Wu Du’s,” Duan Ling observed. He placed the glove in a wooden basin to dry, then cleaned Zheng Yan’s arm and hand with a dry cloth before applying the medicine.

“Did Changliu-jun hear it?” Zheng Yan asked, his voice gone so cold and distant he seemed to be a different person.

“I think he may have.”

Zheng Yan fell quiet again. Silence reigned as Duan Ling applied salve and bandaged his arm. Zheng Yan’s eyes shifted back to him.

“You’re quite pretty,” he murmured, reaching his free hand under Duan Ling’s chin and tipping it up slightly.

As his eyes lingered on Duan Ling’s lips, his expression changed, like a thought had struck him. Duan Ling’s heart leapt into his throat.

Yet in the next instant, the corner of Duan Ling’s mouth curved up, and he brought up his hand to nudge Zheng Yan’s aside. Zheng Yan frowned.

“What are you doing?” Duan Ling asked, pulling away. What had Zheng Yan noticed just then? He recalled his father saying that his lips were the Li family’s lips. Zheng Yan was close with the Yao family; he must have seen his aunt many times. Would he make such a connection?

“It’s boring sticking with Wu Du all the time, isn’t it?” Zheng Yan was back to his usual self, favoring Duan Ling with a lopsided grin. “Play

with me instead. Yan-ge will spoil you for three days and three nights. I guarantee you'll never want to leave me."

"Have you played such games with His Highness? You were very diligent, jumping into that river."

"That isn't something to joke about. Do you imagine your head is so firmly attached to your neck?"

"Who was that guy with His Highness today?" Duan Ling shifted the topic of conversation to Cai Yan—he wanted to see how Zheng Yan would react.

"His name is Feng Duo," Zheng Yan said. "Awful man. Don't provoke him."

Wu Du returned and set a jar of wine on the table.

"Get outta here when you're done. We're tired," he said. Taking no heed of Zheng Yan, he undressed right there, changing into casual robes. Remembering Zheng Yan's clothes were still damp from his dip in the river, he told Duan Ling, "Give Zheng Yan a clean set too."

Zheng Yan waved the offer aside. He took a sip from the jar and immediately spat it out. "What is this? Your piss?" he exclaimed, his face scrunched in displeasure.

Wu Du finished changing, surreptitiously folding the exam papers and tucking them away inside his sword case. "Quit complaining. Where am I supposed to find good wine in the dead of night? I took it from the kitchen."

Duan Ling's head was aching from standing out in the cold wind earlier, so he lay down and listened to them bicker.

"Asleep?" Wu Du asked after a moment.

"Awake." Duan Ling rolled over to face them. "What kind of person is that Feng Duo?"

"A criminal," Zheng Yan said. "He was sentenced to death for colluding with foreigners. His execution was set for this autumn, but when the capital moved, he was brought to Jiang Prefectural City with the court."

“What did he collude to do?” Wu Du asked, less familiar with court affairs.

“Thirteen years ago, Southern Chen devised a plan to sow dissent among our enemies,” Zheng Yan drawled. “Fei Hongde had convinced the Yelü family to accuse an influential family of scholars in the Liao court—the Cai family—of treasonous intentions. Before Feng Duo had joined the shadow squad, his older sister happened to have married into this family. To save his sister, he leaked the information to Cai Ye. He was then betrayed by someone else in the shadow squad and thrown in prison…”

Duan Ling and Wu Du exchanged a look as Zheng Yan leisurely sipped another mouthful of wine.

In the dim halls of the Eastern Palace, Cai Yan couldn’t stop gasping for air. He was frightened out of his wits. Even after he changed his robes, his eyes remained round with fear; his lips were pale, and he paced the floor, agitated.

Lang Junxia sat at the table, drinking his tea.

At last Cai Yan seemed to collect himself. He crossed the room in a few strides and slapped him soundly across the face. The crisp sound echoed through the chamber.

“You… You dare…”

Lang Junxia held his silence. Cai Yan viciously kicked over his table with a loud clatter. “Speak!” Cai Yan yelled at him, almost crazed. “Say something!”

“It’s late,” Lang Junxia replied. “You should sleep, Your Highness.”

“Traitor!” Cai Yan roared. “Backstabbing traitor! Scum!”

Suddenly a cold-glinting sword was pressed against Cai Yan’s throat—Cai Yan hadn’t even seen him unsheathe it. Lang Junxia held the hilt firmly in his grip.

Cai Yan realized all at once that he’d already dismissed the servants; they were entirely alone. Lang Junxia could pierce his throat at any time with the smallest move. He backed up a step, and Chilling Edge followed him like his shadow.

“I’d advise Your Highness not to make a scene.” Lang Junxia lowered his voice and solemnly continued, “Or both our lives will be lost in vain.”

Cai Yan steadied himself, then took another step back. This time the sword stayed where it was.

“Too late… It’s too late,” Cai Yan said, trembling. “They all heard him say it—and especially Zheng Yan. He’ll definitely tell my uncle.”

“He’s not your uncle,” Lang Junxia said flatly, sheathing his blade. “He’s someone else’s uncle.”

“You’ll kill him for me, right?” Cai Yan said, breathless again. “He escaped—he was lucky. Help me kill him, and then we’ll kill everyone who heard what Amugu said. Lang Junxia, you promised me that for as long as I sat in this position, no one would know the truth and live.”

“All men’s strength is limited. I’ll do my best. Now take a calmant and rest. Once you sleep, you won’t be so afraid.”

“Kill him. Right now,” Cai Yan begged. “Please! Lang Junxia!”

He rushed forward, but Lang Junxia spun out of his reach and grabbed him by the collar. Shoving him onto the divan, he whispered, “Your Highness, if you kill some boy who has nothing to do with you, Mu Kuangda will become suspicious. Don’t forget. Changliu-jun heard it too.”

Cai Yan swallowed hard.

Lang Junxia said nothing more; he simply turned and left.

In bed that night, Cai Yan tossed and turned. One moment he thought about how Duan Ling had survived and became overwhelmed by terror; the next, he thought about how he would answer Li Yanqiu tomorrow if he asked about what Amugu had revealed. *Amugu was fabricating tales! Spreading lies! It was slander!*

When he’d first come to Xichuan, rumors had swirled through the court. Ultimately it was Wu Du who’d confirmed his identity and laid them to rest. Why, then, was Duan Ling now with Wu Du? Wu Du had called him “Wang Shan”—did he even know?

Wu Du had never seen Duan Ling before, and Duan Ling had no way to prove his identity.

How had Duan Ling survived?

Cai Yan sat up and called to an attendant outside, “Summon Feng. Hurry, summon him now.”

Feng came at once, without even changing his clothes. He stood at attention outside the bed’s canopy. “Your Highness. What are your orders?”

Cai Yan deliberated at length, but when the words reached his lips, he didn’t know how to speak them aloud. He could only say, exhausted, “Sit there. Take a seat.”

Feng sat, and Cai Yan heaved a long sigh. He leaned back against the pillows, his face deathly pale, and stared weakly up at the canopy.

“Your Highness, would you like an imperial physician to come examine you?” a servant called in.

“No need.”

He had begun to consider escaping from the palace. Maybe he should end this ruse once and for all. But where could he run to? Zheng Yan, Wu Du, Changliu-jun… They were all skilled warriors. Without Lang Junxia protecting him, hunting him down would be too easy. He was being punished for breaking the vow he’d made before Li Jianhong—sentenced to spend all of eternity within raging flames, never to find peace.

It never occurred to him to beg Duan Ling for forgiveness. He knew Duan Ling wouldn’t spare him—and even if he did, Li Yanqiu would surely have him executed by a thousand cuts. He might as well poison Li Yanqiu, then kill everyone else… This final, terrible thought burned through Cai Yan’s mind, sapping his strength and knocking him into sleep.

Chapter 110

THE SUN WAS ALREADY up when Duan Ling opened his eyes, exhausted from the previous night's events. Wu Du was still asleep, a comforting presence beside him.

Duan Ling turned over and nestled against him, burying his face in his chest. He didn't smell nice—a little sweaty, since he'd gone straight to bed last night without washing.

What time is it? Several thoughts crowded into his mind at once, but one drowned out the rest: *I don't have to study today!* The realization put him in high spirits right away. The peach blossoms outside were still in full bloom, scattering on the spring breeze.

Zheng Yan had left at some point in the night. Duan Ling stood in the doorway, gazing out into the courtyard. After a moment, he turned to check for the yellowed exam papers in the sword case. Thankfully, they were still there. The day was sure to bring a difficult obstacle: Mu Kuangda would ask questions. He needed to prepare his answers in advance.

First, he would definitely ask about the kidnapping; that was easy enough to explain away.

Second, Changliu-jun would almost certainly have mentioned the supposed correspondence between the envoys and Batu, which could not under any circumstances be handed over. Otherwise, Cai Yan's identity—and his own—would be immediately exposed.

But that brought him to another question. Should he try and prove to Mu Kuangda that the crown prince was an impostor, as Amugu had said? If Mu Kuangda believed him, would he take action against Cai Yan? The situation was more favorable now—Zheng Yan, Changliu-jun, and Lang Junxia had all heard Amugu's words; he didn't even have to make the claim himself. Yao Fu, Mu Kuangda, Cai Yan, and even Li Yanqiu would have to consider what to do with this information.

"What are you planning?" Wu Du asked, awake now. He put a hand to his forehead as he sat up, as if fighting a headache. It seemed he'd had

some wine with Zheng Yan last night after all.

Duan Ling unfolded the old exam papers on the table, mulling over Cai Yan's most likely response. As long as Duan Ling had known him, Cai Yan had been someone who kept things hidden in his heart, but was nonetheless extremely persistent. When they'd met the previous night, Cai Yan had been shaken; he'd barely even reacted when he was kidnapped. But once he was back in the imperial palace, he'd undoubtedly start planning how to patch up his lie.

"This is the entrance exam for Biyong Academy," Duan Ling said. "It would have been left in Shangjing; the Mongols must've taken back the whole box. I can't believe Batu kept it."

Duan Ling and Cai Yan's calligraphy styles were completely different. Cai Yan's elder brother had taught him how to write when he was young, and his calligraphy was neat and sharp on the page, qualities of a military man. Duan Ling's was the complete opposite—after copying the script of the renowned calligrapher Madam Wei for years under Lang Junxia's tutelage, he had a fluid and elegant hand.

"Cai Yan's calligraphy looks like it was taught to him by a swordsman," Wu Du remarked. "He uses so much force it can be seen through the paper. It was one of the reasons why the fourth prince believed him at first."

"Seems like I don't resemble my dad in any way," Duan Ling said with an edge of bitterness.

"Your tone is like his," Wu Du said. After some further thought, he corrected himself: "No, maybe it's more like the current emperor's, who plays everything down."

"If we showed this evidence to my fourth uncle, do you think he'd believe it?"

Their seals were stamped at the end of the exam papers. If Cai Yan had told Li Yanqiu he went by the name Duan Ling back in Shangjing, then so long as Li Yanqiu saw the exam paper with Duan Ling's seal on it but with calligraphy starkly different from Cai Yan's own, the truth would be obvious.

However, if Cai Yan had never mentioned the name Duan Ling, then when the calligraphy on the exam paper was compared with the current crown prince's own, the conclusion would naturally be that the crown prince had once gone by the name Cai Yan. How would Cai Yan smooth out that lie? Li Yanqiu would've interrogated him thoroughly when he first returned to Xichuan from Shangjing. Mu Kuangda wasn't the type to allow any inconsistencies to slip through the cracks, and Xie You was the same, if not even more meticulous.

Wu Du sat on the bed, staring at Duan Ling.

"Did he ever tell anyone what name he used in Shangjing?" Duan Ling asked.

"I don't know. I was in the imperial prison at that time. When they interrogated me, all they asked was if he was the boy I was looking for in Shangjing that year."

On that day, when Wu Du had been taken to the hall in rough prisoner's garb, Li Yanqiu had asked him only that one question; with his affirmative answer, all the details had aligned, restoring the crown prince of Southern Chen to his rightful status—or so they'd thought.

In that case, their first order of business was to find out whether—and how—Cai Yan could continue covering up his lies in the face of this new evidence.

"Excuse me!" The residence's steward called to them respectfully from the gates. "Prime Minister Mu summons you both."

Here it comes. Mu Kuangda was ready to ask about last night's events.

The prime minister had woken up in the first hour of the morning, whereupon he drank three cups of tea, as was his habit. Changliu-jun knelt by his side but tactfully waited until he'd finished to report the previous night's events. Mu Kuangda's expression had darkened as he listened. Before Changliu-jun reached the end of his tale, he stopped him. "We'll talk about the rest later," he said, and ordered the servants to summon Chang Pin, Wu Du, and Duan Ling.

Chang Pin was first to arrive, though he had no idea why he'd been summoned. Once Duan Ling and Wu Du appeared as well, Mu Kuangda

ordered breakfast and turned to Changliu-jun. “You may finish telling the story.”

Changliu-jun began again, recounting the events of the night in detail. Mu Kuangda already seemed to be aware of the Yuan envoy’s kidnapping attempt; too much had happened at the post house for the capital’s soldiers to ignore it. When Changliu-jun paused halfway through his tale, Chang Pin leaned over to Mu Kuangda. “We already took care of things with Xie You’s men. You went to bed early, Your Excellency, so we didn’t wish to disturb you at the time.”

“Ah,” Mu Kuangda said, nodding. He leveled his gaze at Duan Ling. “Is that what happened? Is anything missing from Changliu-jun’s account?”

“No, Your Excellency.”

Changliu-jun remembered everything with great clarity and was organized in his retelling. When he mentioned Lang Junxia opening the secret compartment in the scabbard, he shot a glance toward Wu Du and Duan Ling.

“Borjigin Batu gave Amugu and Khatanbaatar two secret letters,” Duan Ling said, ready with his response. “I’ve already passed them to Zheng Yan.”

“That’s not what you said last night. Didn’t you say you would give them to Prime Minister Mu?” Changliu-jun asked.

Duan Ling nodded, holding Mu Kuangda’s gaze. “But I realized it would be better for Zheng Yan to present them to His Majesty rather than Prime Minister Mu—so I struck while the iron was hot and gave them to Zheng Yan then and there.”

Chang Pin directed a questioning stare at Duan Ling. “Why?”

Mu Kuangda shouldn’t be particularly suspicious of him yet. Duan Ling let himself be purposefully enigmatic. “Let’s hear the rest of Changliu-jun’s story.”

Changliu-jun continued his report. When he arrived at the Mongols kidnapping the crown prince, Mu Kuangda and Chang Pin were both aghast.

“Wang Shan, you’re too fearless,” Chang Pin said in disbelief. “How could you play with the life of the crown prince?”

This man’s too smart—he guessed my motives just from the retelling, Duan Ling thought.

Mu Kuangda, on the other hand, showed no change of expression. Taking another sip of tea, he said, “Changliu-jun, continue.”

As Changliu-jun recounted how the crown prince was kicked into the river, even Mu Kuangda couldn’t help wincing. However, when they heard what Amugu had shouted after, both Mu Kuangda and Chang Pin were truly stunned.

For a long time, no one spoke. The room was dead silent.

“I see.” Mu Kuangda laughed. “Ha, I knew he was a fake.”

Now it was Duan Ling’s turn to be taken aback. He’d expected Mu Kuangda to be shocked, yes, but not that he—the prime minister of the country—would so readily accept such a reality.

“Borjigin Batu must have been classmates with Li Jianhong’s true son,” Chang Pin said to Mu Kuangda. “He sent an envoy to Southern Chen to discover if his suspicions were warranted. Once he confirmed something was amiss, he dispatched these envoys to verify his guess using the crown prince’s birthday celebration as pretext.”

“Indeed.” Mu Kuangda turned his attention to Duan Ling. “Did the letters mention this?”

“Y-yes.” Duan Ling jolted back to his senses and darted a glance at Wu Du.

Wu Du, though also taken by surprise, nodded. “That’s correct. Changliu-jun was beside me at the time, but I acted on my own, thinking it would be best if fewer people knew of this.”

On the way, Wu Du and Duan Ling had already discussed their plan. Now Duan Ling seamlessly took up the explanation. “Originally I intended to give them to you, Prime Minister Mu, to do with as you saw fit—but when I heard Amugu shout those words, I made a swift decision to hand the letters over to Zheng Yan. He was sure to report what he heard back to His Majesty when he returned to the palace, and having physical evidence in

hand would help his case. Besides, if Wuluohou Mu knew we kept the evidence, it would only invite unnecessary trouble. Truly, there is never a day of peace."

Mu Kuangda ruminated over this for a long time. He looked at Chang Pin, who nodded without speaking.

And at that precise moment, Duan Ling understood what they were planning. *Thank goodness,* he thought. Otherwise, the situation would've spiraled further out of control. Mu Kuangda and Chang Pin must already have been conspiring to bring down Cai Yan before this—and if that was the case, it matched what Wu Du had suspected. Mu Kuangda didn't merely want to control Li Yanqiu—he wanted to control the entire empire of Southern Chen. If those two exam papers fell into his hands, Cai Yan would be obliterated immediately.

As for the young man called Wang Shan… Could he hope to reclaim his rightful place in court with no evidence beyond two yellowed exam papers?

"This was not a decision to make without consulting me, Wang Shan," Mu Kuangda said, his voice taking on an icy edge.

Wu Du avoided Mu Kuangda's gaze, instead fixing his eyes on Changliu-jun as he said, "The decision was mine."

"Enough," Mu Kuangda snapped in irritation. "You two—out. Changliu-jun, you as well."

The three of them stood and left. Duan Ling shot an uneasy glance at Wu Du, who gave him a little wave to reassure him. He whispered, "What can he do to us? Cross me and I'll poison everyone in this manor. He wants the whole family to rise with him? Then I'll send them straight to the heavens."

Duan Ling laughed. Wu Du's words reminded him of Mu Qing, and he set off to visit him.

Inside the room behind them, Mu Kuangda's brow was deeply furrowed. He set a cup of tea on the corner of the table; Chang Pin picked it up and drank.

“Your Excellency, in retrospect, Wang Shan took the best course available to him,” Chang Pin said.

Having given it some thought, Mu Kuangda had to concur. He sighed. “You think I don’t know this? Zheng Yan hearing the accusation and reporting to Li Yanqiu with Borjigin’s secret letters on the same night is far more believable than if they had passed through my hands on their way. I am simply worried Wang Shan has some ulterior motive. That young man—though he’s had no teacher, his actions are thorough and calculated. His considerations go far beyond what I’d expect from a boy his age. I fear I may not be able to tame him.”

As Chang Pin chuckled, a thought occurred to Mu Kuangda, and a smile stole over his face. Nodding, he said, “In fact, he reminds me of you.”

“He can be tamed,” Chang Pin said.

“Never mind—perhaps I was wrong. I only hope he’ll pass the imperial examination. Go, summon him back.”

Chang Pin stepped outside and called for a servant to summon Duan Ling. Alone for a moment, Mu Kuangda muttered to himself, “The heavens are truly on our side. Our success is so close I can taste it.”

Chang Pin returned. “Your Excellency,” he warned, “you’ve been visiting the palace too often. Xie You is already suspicious; you must be careful.”

With that word of caution lingering in the air, the two sank into silence.

Chapter 111

DUAN LING HAD just arrived at Mu Qing's rooms when he was called back to see Mu Kuangda. This time, Chang Pin left the room without being asked; he told Wu Du to remain outside and closed the doors behind him, leaving Mu Kuangda and Duan Ling alone.

Mu Kuangda's anger had dissipated. He observed Duan Ling as he began, "Last night, Huang Jian waited for you two at the banquet the entire night, yet you never came. Remember to apologize to your shixiong[9] later."

"I will." Duan Ling hurriedly gave a respectful nod.

These two foxes shared a tacit understanding. Mu Kuangda didn't waste words telling Duan Ling to keep what he knew to himself, and Duan Ling obviously wouldn't tell anyone else.

"Do you remember the contents of the letters? How strange that the Mongols would write in Han."

Duan Ling cursed himself for forgetting this detail. *One must tell more and more lies to cover up the first.* "Yes, they were in Han. I thought it strange as well."

Mu Kuangda thought for a moment, then said, "Write down everything you remember."

Duan Ling fetched brush and ink and set to fabricating the letter from whole cloth, imitating Batu's style from memory. After making up the first letter, he said, "I don't remember the specifics very well."

Mu Kuangda summoned Chang Pin back. "Bring the last letter Borjigin Batu sent from the library." Duan Ling's heart pounded as he forged the second letter. He laid it next to the first. "It seemed Batu wrote the second one himself as well. It was about the alliance, but I can't remember much of this one."

He set down the brush, and Chang Pin, having returned from the library, placed Batu's old letter in front of Mu Kuangda. Mu Kuangda

looked over the pages and remarked, “The tone does match that of the Mongol prince.”

Duan Ling let out a silent breath of relief. He’d passed another test.

Chang Pin glanced over the letters and said with a smile, “Funny. Your calligraphy is a bit like his.”

Back in school, Batu had learned calligraphy, reading, and writing essays mostly from Duan Ling—something Duan Ling only realized in this moment. “Really?”

Duan Ling took the letter and examined it carefully. Batu’s handwriting was familiar, as were the many grammatical errors. He found it both amusing and nostalgic; he couldn’t help but miss Batu. Mixed emotions washed over him.

“It’s true Borjigin Batu grew up in Shangjing,” Chang Pin said. “He must’ve learned Han there. His father Kuchi is illiterate. Perhaps the prince has forgotten the Mongolian script of his forefathers. Though he can speak his native tongue, he can’t read or write it; therefore everything is transmitted in Han.”

“I think…” Mu Kuangda studied Duan Ling’s letters. “It’s very likely Batu didn’t wish any others in the tribe to know of these plans. He wrote in Han to both Amugu and Khatanbaatar as a way of keeping the secret and preventing the situation from being shared beyond a trusted few.”

Duan Ling could have wept with gratitude at Mu Kuangda smoothing over his lie.

“Well, I’ll keep these as evidence,” Mu Kuangda said, handing all three letters to Chang Pin to store away before turning on Duan Ling. “Wang Shan, you’ve completed your exams. I’ll grant you some time off to visit family, if you wish. In half a month, return to the manor to assist Mister Chang Pin and begin learning how to manage our affairs.”

With this, Duan Ling understood he was out of danger. He bowed to Mu Kuangda and took his leave, shutting the door behind him.

“I’ve noticed no matter what happens, Wang Shan seems to take it in stride,” Chang Pin observed. “He’s rather steady.”

“That boy is capable of great things. We’ll train him slowly—and it’s rare for anyone to have such an intimate friendship with Qing-er. Chang Pin, it seems we must change our plans again.”

After a beat of silence, Chang Pin nodded.

The day was sunny and bright. Li Yanqiu sat in the palace hall with only Zheng Yan beside him.

“What kind of joke is this?” Li Yanqiu said, narrowing his eyes as he listened to Zheng Yan’s story.

Zheng Yan said nothing, only looking steadily at Li Yanqiu.

“Who else heard it?”

“Changliu-jun, Wuluohou Mu, Wu Du, Feng Duo, and Wang Shan, the boy from the prime minister’s residence.”

“It’s impossible,” Li Yanqiu said. “How do you explain his knowledge of the Mountain and River Sword Style? Would the late emperor have taught it to an outsider?”

“What if even the late emperor was deceived?” Zheng Yan said. “Amugu didn’t explain the situation clearly—and if Wuluohou Mu misled the late emperor from the start—”

“If he was also deceived, then it’s fine. If even my brother accepted him, what does that have to do with you and me?”

Zheng Yan had never expected Li Yanqiu to say such a thing; it struck him speechless.

“Your Majesty, the crown prince requests an audience,” a servant announced from outside the hall.

Cai Yan entered, seemingly in good spirits. He glanced over at Zheng Yan and nodded. Li Yanqiu observed Cai Yan as he greeted the emperor and knelt by his side, gazing at his uncle with a smile.

“What’s the matter?” Li Yanqiu said. “Did you miss us so much?”

“That Mongol said I’m a fraud,” Cai Yan said.

Zheng Yan’s face twitched.

“You don’t need to pay any mind to what they say,” Li Yanqiu said.

“Back then, everyone said the same thing,” Cai Yan pressed.

Li Yanqiu laughed—but Cai Yan remained silent. The rims of his eyes turned red, and he twisted his head away. Li Yanqiu cupped a hand around the nape of Cai Yan’s neck, and Cai Yan leaned into his shoulder, beginning to sob.

“You’re still thinking of what I said to you back then, aren’t you?” Li Yanqiu murmured. “You’re as vindictive as your father. The day you came back, you held onto me and cried just like this.”

Sobs racked Cai Yan.

“On the third day of this month, it will have been two years,” Li Yanqiu continued. “Even I’m not crying anymore. Why do you still act like a child who refuses to grow up?”

Zheng Yan was still studying Cai Yan, his frown deep, unsure now if he was the real crown prince or a convincing fake.

Cai Yan shook his head against Li Yanqiu’s shoulder, and Li Yanqiu motioned for Zheng Yan to take his leave. He pulled Cai Yan into his embrace and continued comforting him as Zheng Yan padded silently out of the hall.

Duan Ling returned home amid a flurry of peach blossoms to find that Wu Du had gone out. The first thing Duan Ling did was check for the two exam papers, but when he opened the sword case, they were gone. After a moment of blank panic, Duan Ling spotted the note Wu Du had left in the case: *I’ll wait for you under the bridge.*

He had nearly been scared out of his wits. Suspecting Wu Du was messing with him, he peered around suspiciously for anything else. When he tidied himself and strode out the courtyard gates, he saw Wu Du’s silhouette flash by in the alley. It figured that, even when Wu Du was teasing him, he didn’t dare stray too far from Duan Ling.

Nine rivers surrounded the city, festooned in the colors of spring, and three mountains encircled their shores. The waterways of Jiang Prefectural City crossed and intersected, and so nine ancient bridges had been built

along the bluestone paths. As peach blossoms fluttered through the sky, small boats came and went, and fishermen hollered over the sides to sell their river catches along the banks. The main street veered toward one bridge, and when Duan Ling walked under it, looking around, a peach branch tapped his head. He looked up.

Wu Du beamed down at him, leaning over the bridge railing. Duan Ling ran onto the bridge, but Wu Du was faster, and he disappeared out of sight again.

"Wu Du! Stop—hey!"

Wu Du was waiting somberly at the end of the bridge. Duan Ling walked toward him, and under the brilliant sunlight, Wu Du's smile was breathtakingly handsome. His black martial robes rendered his figure even more striking in the warm spring day; Duan Ling couldn't help but bound the last few steps forward and wrap his arms around him.

"What's all this now?" Wu Du asked.

"What's with *you*? And where are the things from the room?" Duan Ling returned.

Wu Du patted his scabbard. "When the sword is here, the man is alive. When the sword is broken, the man is dead."

Duan Ling pressed a hand to his forehead. "Why do you all love hiding things in your scabbards?"

But truthfully—other than for Amugu, the poor devil—there was no better place than a scabbard to hide something one intended to carry at all times. An assassin's sword never left his side.

"Where are we off to? A new mission?" Duan Ling asked.

Wu Du seemed slightly flustered. "Come—come down here."

Duan Ling's mood lifted exponentially. So much had happened over the past few days, one thing after another. But now the sea and sky were free to roam—the clouds and fog shrouding him had been swept away.

Wu Du led them to the dock and pointed to a small, flat-bottomed sampan, motioning for Duan Ling to step aboard. Duan Ling had seen Wu Du's skill with a boat for himself and climbed in happily. Wu Du untied the mooring line and jumped in as well, pushing out from the dock with his

pole. Their little craft wove through the boats of the floating market and glided out, cutting through the water swift as an arrow. They followed the winding waterway to the city walls, where they lined up at its narrow entrance to wait for the Black-Plated Army to clear them to leave the city.

This was the first time Duan Ling had ever traveled by boat, and his heart swelled with excitement. Once Wu Du passed the guard inspection, he poled them out of the waterway and into the river's current. Suddenly, the view opened up, their sight filled with the rippling waters of the wide river surging eastward.

Thousands of sails raced across the water. Wu Du set theirs easily as well, winding the rope several times and hanging it up before sitting next to Duan Ling.

"It's beautiful," Duan Ling said. "Where are we headed?"

"To the ends of the earth," Wu Du replied. "Wanna go?"

A deep exhaustion washed over Duan Ling, but nonetheless, he was happy—especially when he saw the endless blue sky and the broad river spread before him. He felt as if all the beauty of the world was right there in front of his eyes.

"Yes."

Neither of them spoke, lounging quietly in the boat.

"When we go back, perhaps you'll become the emperor," Wu Du said. "It may be a long, long time before we can travel like this again."

Duan Ling understood what he meant. Now that they had evidence in hand, they were one step closer to restoring him to his rightful place. But staying in Jiang Prefectural City before the results of the metropolitan examination came out wasn't a good idea.

The sampan sailed down the river and into another narrow waterway, heading northward; lush, green mountains stretched toward the sky on either shore. Wu Du shrugged off his outer robe, rolled up his pants, and steered the boat barefoot from the stern. He bought a little food from a passing fisherman, and Duan Ling unearthed a charcoal stove, lit it near the bow, and cobbled together a fish stew and steamed rice.

He didn’t ask again where they were going. As they journeyed onward, he realized he wouldn’t mind living the rest of his life this way. People were but rootless duckweed, drifting far and wide; all the rich and varied lives the vast universe held were like the scattered birds crisscrossing in flight below the towering peaks of the mountains. Maybe everything really was that simple.

It rained that night, and Duan Ling and Wu Du slept in the boat’s little cabin, listening to the raindrops pattering against the river. When they peeked outside, the river’s surface bristled with thousands of small splashes. Later, the wind blew and the dark clouds scattered, and they lay together on the deck, embraced by the long, glassy river below and the thousands of twinkling stars above.

Two days passed, just like that. On the third, by the time Duan Ling yawned himself awake, Wu Du had poled them to shore in a remote stretch of wilderness. A bluestone road wound away into the mountains.

“Where are we?” Duan Ling asked.

Wu Du looked up. He let the silence hang for a moment, then said, “I’ll carry you.”

“Let’s walk together. Are we going to a temple?” Duan Ling asked.

“You’ll find out when we get there,” Wu Du said, though he seemed a little nervous.

They climbed the bluestone steps. The road had been abandoned for some time, its stones covered in moss. When they arrived at the bluffs, they stepped onto a winding planked gallery road that stretched across the cliff faces. Not until the mountain gate at last came into view did Duan Ling finally understand why Wu Du had brought him there.

A huge, lifelike stone sculpture of a white tiger faced the Yangtze River and the Central Plains, covered in a thick sea of rolling clouds far below.

Chapter 112

BEHIND THE SCULPTURE, at the end of the stone stairs, stood a wide platform—and behind it, a dilapidated brick temple. The platform was quiet, deserted; ivy crept up along the impossibly tall stone wall. Yet the mountain peaks were unaffected by the passage of years, as time itself was frozen here.

“Is this where you learned martial arts?” Duan Ling asked.

“Yes. This is the White Tiger Sect.”

They climbed the stairs to the temple, where an establishment plaque hung, slightly crooked, high above the entryway. The words *White Tiger Sect* were written upon it in elongated seal script.

“We’ll stay here tonight,” Wu Du said. “It might be a little chilly up in the mountains, but—”

“It’s all right,” Duan Ling replied, stretching his limbs in front of the hall after their long climb.

As he faced the green peaks and wispy clouds, his heart trembled with the grandeur of the mountains, and his eyes were caught by the flying birds.[10] The handful of days since they’d left Jiang Prefectural City had been the most peaceful of his life. He didn’t have to worry about anyone trying to murder him here, or about being executed for saying the wrong thing. They could sleep soundly, without a care in the world.

He glanced back at Wu Du, who had begun sweeping the brick path inside the main hall. When Duan Ling noticed a bird’s nest on a chair, he picked it up, wiped the chair clean, and returned the nest to its place.

“Hm?” Duan Ling murmured, catching sight of a small animal scurrying behind the pillar. He peered around it at a squirrel, which froze at the sound of his footsteps and turned, eyeing Duan Ling warily as he approached.

“The animals in the mountains aren’t afraid of people,” Wu Du explained.

“Is anyone still here?” Duan Ling asked.

“No. Even back then, there was only Shifu, Shiniang, Shijie, and me.”

Duan Ling thought of Xunchun, who had perished in Shangjing, and sighed.

Once Wu Du finished cleaning, he said, “Duan Ling, come here. Let the tiger god see you.”

Duan Ling walked to the center of the hall and looked up to see an enshrined tiger carved of white marble. It seemed to have had jewels set in its eyes at some point, but they had long since disappeared, most likely dug out by thieves. Behind the tiger was a cracked and worn mural of the famed painting *A Thousand Miles of Mountains and Rivers*, inlaid with seven white marble weiqi pieces.

Wu Du addressed the statue: “I, Wu Du, seventeenth generation disciple of the White Tiger Sect, inheritor of the art of poison and head of the White Tiger Sect, have come today with the crown prince of the Central Plains…”

Surprised, Duan Ling quickly straightened his posture. Wu Du stood tall, crossing his left hand over his right to greet the White Tiger.

“…to pray for the Celestial White Tiger to watch over… What’s your real name again?” he asked Duan Ling.

“Huh?”

“Your name.”

They stared at each other, silent.

“And you call yourself the head of the sect?” Duan Ling said, pained.

“You scared me stupid that day; how was I supposed to remember? Just tell me.”

Duan Ling stepped forward. “Li Ruo greets the great god.”

He knew the White Tiger was the god of weaponry and soldiers, overseeing all to do with warfare, and so he bowed and said, “May my Great Chen be forever victorious in battle.”

Wu Du laughed and said to the statue, “I pray to the great celestial god to protect the crown prince of Great Chen, Li Ruo, and to ensure his smooth return to the court.”

As they gazed silently up at the white tiger sculpture with its lost eyes, a breeze whistled past them from the back of the hall, lifting the hems of their robes and rushing away through the front doors—like a tiger running through a forest of rustling leaves.

“What happened to its eyes?” Duan Ling asked.

“I don’t know. As far back as I can remember, they’ve been missing. They were probably dug out long ago. But though it can’t see, it can still hear.”

Strangely, Duan Ling thought this made sense; the tiger had heard, and the gust of wind had been its answer.

Duan Ling had never been as free as he was now. That afternoon, Wu Du went back down the stone steps and hauled bedding and food up from the boat. Duan Ling offered to help, but Wu Du merely laid their things on the platform and told him to rest before going to grab more supplies.

The White Tiger Sect had a back courtyard divided into east and west wings, as well as a middle courtyard where Wu Du’s shifu and shiniang had once lived. Duan Ling spotted a pill furnace that still contained crystallized cinnabar and a dark medicinal mixture. The west wing had been Xunchun’s; when he pushed open the door to look inside, he found an empty room covered in spiderwebs and dust. The east wing belonged to Wu Du. The room held a bed and two wooden shelves, all aged, upon which piles of termite-eaten books were stacked.

“What a shame,” Duan Ling said. “Look at the state of these precious manuals. Aren’t you afraid the techniques will be lost?”

Wu Du had brought water from the stream behind the hall, and he set to cleaning the courtyard with his sleeves rolled above the elbow. “There’s no one left, so there’s nobody to care if the techniques are lost.”

“What’s in there?” Duan Ling asked, pointing at the furnace.

“The pills Shifu was making in pursuit of immortality. It was fine at first, but after consuming too much of the medicine, his martial arts

deteriorated. When the old capital declared a state of emergency, he and Shiniang rushed down the mountain to help. He should've come back unscathed, but he'd taken some bullshit pill that kept him from gathering his qi. The Khitan soldiers shot him dead."

"Where is he buried? Should we visit him?"

"His empty tomb is out back," Wu Du said. "Shijie asked someone to bring the headstone back after the Khitan took Shangzi. We can go when we're done here. There's no rush."

Duan Ling helped Wu Du tidy the room. Upon seeing Duan Ling carefully stacking the books, Wu Du said, "I don't need anything in here anymore. Just throw them out."

"No, no, these are too useful."

"I've memorized it all," Wu Du said. "Don't flip through those. You'll sneeze from all the dust."

As if his saying it had made it so, Duan Ling sneezed hard, at least a dozen times, before putting Wu Du's books back neatly on the shelf, planning to copy them when he had time later and preserve the skills of the White Tiger Sect. Dusk was falling; Wu Du was only half finished cleaning when he stopped to light a fire and cook dinner for Duan Ling.

Duan Ling peered at Wu Du as he busied about, feeling like a child again as words he'd once heard echoed in his head: *There will be those who are good to you, no matter who you are, no matter what.* He thought, *If I weren't the crown prince of Southern Chen, would Wu Du have brought me here?*

After pondering this for a moment, Duan Ling concluded that he would've.

He noticed an old and dusty box under the shelf and bent down to unlatch it. Inside were wooden horses and figures carved with rough strokes of a paring knife—toys Wu Du must've made for himself during his lonely childhood. A red cloth bag was nestled underneath. Duan Ling was about to open it when Wu Du caught a glimpse and yelped, "Don't…touch that!"

Assuming it held poison, Duan Ling froze. Wu Du came over with a red face and stuffed the cloth bag back down into the bottom of the box.

“What is it?” Duan Ling asked.

“Nothing.” Wu Du’s obvious embarrassment made Duan Ling even more curious, and he continued pestering him with questions. Wu Du attempted to escape to the kitchen to add water to the pot for steamed fish, but Duan Ling followed right at his heels, pressing until Wu Du had no choice but to reveal the secret. “It’s a dudou I wore when I was really little.”

Duan Ling was rendered briefly speechless. Then he burst into hearty laughter.

“Don’t laugh!” Wu Du complained, unhappy.

Duan Ling suddenly understood. “You wore it when you were younger?”

“Yeah. When Shiniang picked me up off the streets, it was the only thing I had.”

“Do you have a birth certificate? Or do you know your parents’ names?”

“No. If I had anything back then, Shifu must’ve burned it,” Wu Du said. “Assassins aren’t allowed to have parents.”

“Then does that mean you don’t know when your birthday is?”

“Shifu always considered it…the day Shiniang took me in.”

Duan Ling came to another realization. “Which day is that?”

Wu Du didn’t respond right away. Duan Ling wanted to keep asking until he answered, but Wu Du finally said, “I’ll tell you when it comes.”

Duan Ling stuck out his pinky, and Wu Du hooked his own around it.

“Stay put and wait for dinner,” he said. “Nobody’s around here to kill you, but it would still be dangerous to get lost in the mountains.”

He was allowed to go anywhere from the gallery road to the stone steps at the end of the platform, Wu Du explained, including the entire perimeter of the White Tiger Sect compound, but not into the mountains at the back.

Duan Ling thus drifted out and went to stand at the edge of the platform, looking out over the sea of clouds. Wreathed in veils of mist, the mountaintop felt like a tranquil paradise, cut off the rest of existence. The

mayhem and opulence of Jiang Prefectural City, the deadly conflicts between hostile parties—all were forgotten at this moment as if they had been merely a midday dream.

If they stayed here forever, perhaps they could be lost to the world.

If he stayed here forever, perhaps he could be free of the worries that had plagued him so long.

As he watched the ebb and flow of the clouds below, an idea crept up on him: If he ever reached retirement and laid down his burdens, he would spend the rest of his days here and only here. After going through so much, the happiest thing in the world would be to live a quiet life with someone by his side… And with this thought in his mind, he turned back toward the White Tiger Sect just as Wu Du banged on the pot to call him back for dinner.

"Shoo! Or I'll hit you!"

Duan Ling entered to see Wu Du threatening a monkey that had come down from the trees at the smell of cooking. The monkey wanted food but didn't dare get close; it cast Wu Du and Duan Ling a pitiful look. Duan Ling couldn't help but laugh, and he tossed the creature a piece of dry bread. The monkey grabbed it and scampered away.

Duan Ling watched it go. "There's another one over there." After it grabbed the food, the monkey had delivered it to another, smaller monkey in the tree.

"If it wants to eat, it has to work," Wu Du joked. "Gotta bring home the money if you want to be a laoye."

He shouldered the doors to the hall closed behind them.

A single lamp flickered in the mountain breeze that evening. They ate a few small dishes alongside the fish they'd bought on the river, their feast made whole with two small cups of wine.

When they'd eaten and drunk their fill, Wu Du said to Duan Ling, "Come on. There's somewhere I want to take you."

It happened that the moon was full tonight. Wu Du led Duan Ling into the wilderness behind the sect buildings, then down a narrow path that

wound around to the mountain's other side, where the view opened up and the silver light of the sky illuminated the peaks.

Only this pocket of the mountains, revealed by the moonlight, was brimming with peach trees. *The floral fragrance fades from the land in the fourth month, as the peach blossoms in the mountain temple burst in full bloom*[11]—these mountain peach blossoms were even more luxuriant than those in the city. Thousands of petals swirled down on the wind under the bright moon.

"What do you think?" Wu Du asked with a smile.

Duan Ling was speechless, gazing at the scenery before him in awe.

"There are less than ten days in the year when you can see this," Wu Du said.

"It's too beautiful."

Wu Du led Duan Ling over to a rock and seated himself, taking out his flute and putting it to his lips. The melody of "Joyful Reunion" poured forth, bearing Duan Ling back again to the faraway past.

The song faded, and Duan Ling and Wu Du gazed at each other quietly.

Wu Du's lips trembled, and his breathing came a little quicker. He was wearing only an underrobe and shorts, seated closely beside Duan Ling on the rock. The moonlight shone upon their crisp white clothing and revealed the silhouette of Wu Du's strong and graceful male figure underneath.

"Duan Ling," Wu Du said abruptly. "I…have something I want to tell you."

For some reason, Duan Ling, too, grew nervous. "Wh-what is it?"

Wu Du gazed down at him, and silence fell. Merely a breath later, Wu Du—anxious—twisted his head away, first to glance over at the mountain stream, then up at the luminous moon.

"What is it?" Duan Ling laid his hand over the back of Wu Du's, and Wu Du flipped his own to interlace their fingers, palm to palm.

“Do…” Wu Du wavered again before making up his mind. “Do you like it here?”

A smile crossed Duan Ling’s lips, as stunning as the thousands of peach blossoms flowering in the quiet, moonlit night.

“I was thinking earlier this afternoon,” Duan Ling said as he held Wu Du’s hand, “that one day, I’d like to come live here in the White Tiger Sect and never return to an earthly life.”

“No, no,” Wu Du hurriedly said. “That won’t do. I… You have to…”

“I know,” Duan Ling said. His responsibilities were, after all, quite heavy. “But I can dream.”

“N-no,” Wu Du said, collecting himself. “What I meant was… I want to take you to other places, and if you like them…you can take your time to choose… Anywhere, to the ends of the world, the edge of the ocean—and as long as you want me to, I’ll stay with you.”

Duan Ling was quiet.

“What—what I was thinking was…” Wu Du couldn’t bear to look directly at him and cast his eyes anywhere else. His handsome face was flushed all the way down to his collarbones; even the skin under his tattoo was red, as if he were drunk. He instinctively squeezed Duan Ling’s hand and stammered, “In the future, I’ll take you to those places you wanted to go, to Diannan, to the ocean. You… Shan-er, when you called me your laoye that day, I know you were probably just joking, but I brought you here to ask you if you’re willing…for a lifetime…”

By this point, Wu Du was no longer flustered—the words were already out, so he wasn’t anxious anymore. With a sudden burst of courage, he met Duan Ling’s eyes, held his gaze, and said solemnly: “We can still act the same in front of others. Even after you return to court, I wouldn’t need any official status. As long as you feel the same way, I promise I’ll find the Guardian of the Realm for you and protect you for the rest of your life—until the day I die. I know you’ll become the emperor someday,” Wu Du said. “But I really, really, really want to…with you…”

Wu Du’s nervousness had returned. “I thought—if you agree, I swear I’ll treat you well. It’ll just be us, with no room for anyone else. I’ll take

care of you as if taking care of my…spouse, and you'll…be with me like…"

Duan Ling stared in a daze at Wu Du—who, realizing he was still clutching Duan Ling's hand, quickly let go and reached into his robes. He pulled out a string of red beads.

Wu Du opened his hand and presented the beads to Duan Ling, offering them up like a lowly man presenting a tribute he'd prepared with all the sincerity in his heart—with even more reverence than if he were worshipping before the gods.

And that tribute was a bracelet made of red acacia beads.

Duan Ling's face colored as he realized Wu Du's unfinished words were a confession of love. He'd already sensed Wu Du's feelings before this, and now, he remembered the day when Wu Du had held his hands and said similar words in the maple forest at dusk.

Chapter 113

IN A SINGLE MOMENT, the dark woodshed of the Duan residence; the snowy, frozen Yellow River; the new and gloomy days in Shangjing; the earth-shattering battle; the vivid, bloody night of his rushed escape; the harsh winter of Luoyan; his father's death… All of these became nothing more than scattered memories.

They had both been lonely and helpless since they were children, but now, they faced each other in silence beneath the shower of peach blossoms.

What took the place of his painful memories were the dreams he'd wished for across the winding river of time, those vibrant reveries of the life he wanted. Duan Ling seemed to see himself and Wu Du—the Wu Du who'd grown up here, lonely and miserable—finally come together.

Wu Du's hand had once somberly received the blade that signified the last loyal assassins of the Central Plains; it had also unflinchingly taken a blow powerful enough to split mountains outside Tong Pass. But now, it was trembling uncontrollably.

"I…" Duan Ling took a deep breath to calm his nerves but found himself tongue-tied.

He looked up and met Wu Du's gaze. Wu Du seemed to misinterpret his hesitation—noticing Duan Ling hadn't taken the bracelet, his face fell. Forcing a bitter smile, he nodded, as if he'd expected as much.

Duan Ling left the bracelet in Wu Du's hand. He cupped the back of his neck, closed his eyes—and kissed him.

The mountain breeze swept a flurry of petals into the air.

Wu Du froze, eyes wide, like he'd been struck by lightning, not daring to move a muscle for fear their lips would part. A second passed in this stillness before he came back to his senses and let his eyes focus on Duan Ling, his heart racing madly.

They drew apart, and Duan Ling accepted Wu Du's bracelet, wrapping his fingers around it. He wanted to say something more, but he was breathing too fast and didn't know how to start. Both their faces were aflame. As Duan Ling smiled awkwardly, Wu Du abruptly pushed to his feet, spun on his heel, and ran into the peach groves.

"Wu Du?" Duan Ling called after him.

Wu Du didn't stop, and disappeared in a flash.

Duan Ling was confounded.

He got up and chased after him, only to see Wu Du doing somersaults under a tree—kicking and punching the air, stirring the leaves and petals up to dance around him.

Duan Ling stifled a laugh. Wu Du whirled, realizing Duan Ling had seen, and ducked behind a tree. As Duan Ling slid the bracelet onto his wrist, Wu Du leaned against the peach tree and closed his eyes, letting a mischievous, intoxicating smile spread over his face.

Still, Duan Ling couldn't find the right words. Everything had changed tonight, and the scene before him had taken on entirely new meaning. *I actually kissed him just now! How did I do that?* Wu Du's lips had been warm and soft and completely different from what he was expecting; he was still caught in the moment.

Wu Du peeked out from behind the tree and saw Duan Ling sitting on a rock with his back to him, gazing dreamily out at the moonlit peaks and valleys.

The notes of the flute sounded again, harmonious and joyful. Duan Ling turned to see Wu Du standing under the tree playing a different song, this one a folk tune, and began to laugh in earnest. "What song is this?" he asked.

Wu Du finished the tune, then tucked his flute away and answered with a smile, "'Waterclock, Golden Sparrow Hairpins.' I only heard Shiniang play it once, so I'm not sure if I remember it right."

He took a seat next to Duan Ling once again. They gazed at each other, simply smiling in silence for a while. Wu Du turned and wrapped one

arm around Duan Ling. Bringing his other hand up to cup Duan Ling's cheek, he lowered his head and kissed him.

The bracelet slipped down Duan Ling's wrist as he lifted a hand to Wu Du's face as well.

Their kiss was lingering, as if their long-suppressed emotions had finally found an outlet, turning into a raging flood that drowned them both. Wu Du was unwilling to let go of Duan Ling for a single moment. Looping his arm more firmly around Duan Ling's waist, he pressed him against the rocks behind them as their tongues intertwined. Duan Ling's face grew hot from the kiss, and he felt Wu Du's movements growing rougher.

Suddenly nervous, he struggled in his hold. Wu Du instantly loosened his grip. He broke the kiss, swallowing hard, and met Duan Ling's eyes. As if realizing he'd gone too far, he let Duan Ling go and fussed, "I-I didn't hurt you, did I?"

Duan Ling shook his head. For some reason, the scene he'd witnessed at Qunfang Pavilion resurfaced in his mind. The thought was arousing—but he didn't feel ready to do that just yet.

"Let's…go back," Duan Ling said, thinking it was better to kiss in their room with a roof over their heads.

Wu Du collected himself and hurriedly agreed. "It's windy here. Let's go; don't want you to catch a cold."

Fingers interlocked, they walked slowly back down the mountain path.

"Lao—ye," Duan Ling drawled, having abruptly remembered the address, and laughed.

Wu Du found it funny too, and the corner of his lip curled upward. He glanced over at Duan Ling, then back at the narrow path in front of them, meandering through an expansive sea of clouds and soaring mountains silvered by the moonlight.

That night, after they went to bed, Duan Ling couldn't help reaching out to stroke Wu Du's chest. They lay in one another's embrace, and Wu Du bent his head to kiss him gently. They ground against each other through their underrobes, their bodies burning up. Duan Ling was new to this kind

of intimacy, but it was spring—the season of lust. Wu Du had practiced martial arts for practically his entire life, and his breath came hot and heavy as he had nowhere to release his desire; he wanted to do more than hold Duan Ling—he wanted to ravish him.

They kissed over and over. Wu Du ran his hand along the dips of Duan Ling's back and waist until it slipped beneath the fabric of his pants, reaching the curve of his buttocks. Duan Ling's breath quickened, and Wu Du swallowed hard.

"Do you want… Wanna…do *that*?" Duan Ling asked, suddenly feeling a little scared.

Wu Du snapped back to clarity. After giving it a moment's consideration, he said, "It would hurt a lot. So not now. But in the future."

Duan Ling nodded, his slight tension relaxing again, and wrapped his arms around Wu Du. He gazed at him until Wu Du was compelled to kiss him again.

He whispered, "You're too precious."

Duan Ling smiled, and they pressed close against one another, their mutual arousal rubbing through thin pants. Though Wu Du's cock was still covered, Duan Ling could feel how strong and firm it was—much larger than his own. Pleasure washed through Duan Ling as they slid against each other, until clear liquid began to ooze from his tip.

Wu Du's breathing had grown ragged, his whole body trembling from how good he felt. After a few moments like this, he grabbed Duan Ling and flipped him over, pinning him beneath him on the bed. Wu Du bore down with his weight, pressing their bodies flush, and dropped kisses first on Duan Ling's lips and then on the corner of his mouth. Entwined together, they both fell quiet, gazing into each other's eyes.

Wu Du couldn't help smiling. "I still feel like I'm dreaming."

They kissed again, and again. Duan Ling wasn't ready for…that, but he was still curious. "Does it really hurt? Have you tried it?"

"No. But that's what Zheng Yan said, so…yeah."

"He's done it before?"

Wu Du was at a loss for how to answer, so he slipped a hand under Duan Ling's clothes again. Duan Ling found the sensation ticklish, but he couldn't push Wu Du away with his hands wound around his neck; he begged for mercy. Only then did Wu Du still his roaming hands and respond, "Zheng Yan's a scoundrel. He likes to play with pretty boys. Apparently, without proper preparation, it hurts a lot. I don't want to scare you off it, so when we're home, I'll find some…um… Well, in any case, I'll find what we need. So don't worry about it."

Duan Ling understood, and thought that was probably all true. But it was nice lying like this, on his back with Wu Du's tall body pressed against him. It made him feel safe.

"I'll take you to my home too someday," Duan Ling murmured, staring into Wu Du's handsome face.

"We'll go back for sure."

Wu Du must have thought Duan Ling meant the imperial palace, but in truth, he was thinking of Runan. He wanted to take Wu Du there. It was spring in Runan now. The flowers would be in bloom.

A spring drizzle fell over Jiang Prefectural City that night, and the trees began to unfurl lush green leaves.

Though the lights in the Eastern Palace were bright, the hall was cold and lonely. Cai Yan was sitting behind a desk, exhausted, when Feng Duo came in with a scroll and bowed.

"Did you find him?" Cai Yan asked.

"He's not in the prime minister's manor; he's left the city."

"What about Wuluohou Mu?"

Feng Duo shook his head—he didn't know. Cai Yan swept a hand toward the servants. "You may go."

The palace maid murmured acknowledgment and bowed herself out. Feng Duo pulled a few thin sheets from the stack of scrolls and spread them on the desk. The pages held Duan Ling's neat and elegant calligraphy.

“On the left is Wang Shan’s examination paper; on the right is the copy the examination office made,” Feng Duo said.

Cai Yan scanned through Duan Ling’s essay and sneered. “You’re inches from death, yet you still dream of ruling?”

He touched the paper to the candleflame and slouched to the side, weary.

“This…!” Feng Duo exclaimed. “Your Highness! You mustn’t! How could—”

“How could I what?”

The paper was already burnt. What could Feng Duo do but nod? The scholar said, “I’ve had him looked into. Wang Shan appeared in the prime minister’s manor last year. They say he’s the son of an old friend of Wu Du, and recognizes Wu Du as his adoptive father. Somehow, he earned the favor of your imperial uncle and was allowed to accompany Mu Qing in his studies. When the grace examinations were held at the beginning of the year, he took them alongside Mu Qing.”

“I see,” Cai Yan responded.

“This is but a warning,” Feng Duo said. “Let him go back and study for another three years.”

“I want him dead,” Cai Yan said flatly.

Feng Duo started slightly, taken aback by his vehemence. After a moment’s pause, he nodded. “Yes, Your Highness.”

Cai Yan met his eyes. “The little bastard is lawless. He tried to murder me by using someone else’s hand to throw me in the river. You saw it with your own eyes that night.”

“Indeed,” Feng Duo immediately agreed. “And he deserves death for his offense. But…Wang Shan is from the Mu manor. Were he merely a servant, it would be the work of a moment to deal with him—but he is Wu Du’s adopted son, and His Majesty…”

“This is not my problem,” Cai Yan said. “Think of something, Feng.”

Feng Duo’s brows were knit in a troubled frown. With a slight hesitation, he said, “Your Highness, Wang Shan is a promising scholar.

Why not let bygones be bygones and bring him into the Eastern Palace? He would be deeply grateful to—”

Cai Yan speared him with a sharp look, and the man’s mouth snapped shut.

Chapter 114

CAI YAN MAINTAINED his silence until at last Feng Duo relented. “It won’t be easy to get rid of him.”

“Mm-hmm.” Cai Yan nodded, finally satisfied. “And why not?”

“To have a chance, we must separate him from Wu Du, then keep them apart.”

“I’ve seen Wang Shan’s moves. He possesses some little skill in martial arts. Will half the shadow squad be enough to deal with him?” Cai Yan asked.

“Not within the Mu manor, no, since it’s too easy for Changliu- jun to discover them. If Your Highness has decided to make him disappear, then you must discuss a plan with Wuluohou Mu and ensure Wang Shan is alone when he dies… Indeed, the best method would be this: First, sow discord between him and Wu Du, or between him and the Mu manor. I already have a strategy in mind. Since we’ve burned his examination papers, we shall say we could find no cause for his missing exam, but summon Wu Du to the palace. Wang Shan is a proud person; he will certainly feel uneasy and quarrel with him. We’ll have someone monitor the situation. When Wu Du storms off, we’ll send Wuluohou Mu to capture and dispose of Wang Shan. With this, Wu Du will think he simply ran away—”

“No,” Cai Yan broke in, frowning. “That’s too troublesome, and we can’t count on Wuluohou Mu. His mind is elsewhere. Come up with a better plan and have the shadow squad carry it out.”

Feng Duo ruminated on it further and changed his tune: “Then we can only divert Wu Du first and assassinate Wang Shan thereafter. We’ll do as clean a job as possible. But the prime minister’s manor is sure to investigate if a guest goes missing. Has the Wang family any enemies? As long as they have a single one, we can pin it on them. Killing a man is easy; it’s cleaning up the mess afterward that presents a problem.”

This time, Cai Yan thought, he had to kill Duan Ling no matter what —and see the body for himself. The process would be difficult. It wasn’t

just the matter of successfully killing him. If Duan Ling disappeared, Wu Du would search for him—and who knew what he would turn up in his investigation? Perhaps Cai Yan would be implicated. On top of this, he still wasn't sure whether or not Wu Du knew Duan Ling's true identity. Perhaps he did, since he'd used the cover story that Duan Ling was the son of an old friend.

The last time Cai Yan had seen Duan Ling before the incident at Qunfang Pavilion was the day Lang Junxia made dinner for him. He'd stood outside the hall and watched, lacking the courage to go in and poison Duan Ling himself—instead, he'd made Lang Junxia handle it. Afterward, he'd sent the shadow squad after them, and they'd seen Lang Junxia throw him into the river.

How had Wu Du come to find him? Had he taken him in unknowingly and cured him by chance? To add an extra person to the Mu manor's household, Wu Du would've had to come up with some tale whether he knew his identity or not… And so, even now, Cai Yan held onto a last shred of hope. Cai Yan knew Duan Ling. He wouldn't have trusted Wu Du so easily after having just been betrayed by Lang Junxia. When they'd studied together at Biyong Academy, Duan Ling had been so guarded…

After dwelling on the matter at length, Cai Yan concluded Wu Du had simply picked up a young man in trouble and concocted some lie for Mu Kuangda to explain his presence in the manor. As long as Wu Du wasn't aware of the truth, then Cai Yan still had a chance—even if he had to risk offending Wu Du in the process.

"How long do you need to finish him? Feng Duo, I know you're skilled at this."

"Half a month," Feng Duo replied.

"Then do it. In half a month, I want to see his head with my own eyes."

"Yes, Your Highness."

The next morning, Duan Ling woke to the sound of rain and discovered he needed to wash his pants again—they were sticky. Last night

they’d embraced too tightly, and he’d made a mess in his sleep. When he opened his eyes, he saw that Wu Du had brought some basins to collect the rainwater dripping through the roof. He rolled out of bed, still groggy, and recalled that their courtyard in Xichuan had been like this too: leaking whenever it rained.

Wu Du hadn’t cared back then—obviously, he’d been used to it.

The rain fell in an unbroken sheet. The creek surged from the back of the mountain into the gully behind the east hall, then through the courtyard into the front hall before it rushed off the sides of the platform and plunged into the gorges below like a waterfall. It made for a striking sight.

Duan Ling found Wu Du standing ankle-deep in the water of the front hall, lighting the lamps—a pleasing sight in itself.

“Let’s go back soon,” Wu Du said. “The peach blossoms on the mountain are gone, and the house is leaking.”

“It’s nice here though,” Duan Ling said.

They stood in the courtyard, looking out through the curtain of water. The rain was so heavy Wu Du began to worry the compound would flood. The place had been run-down for a long time; it would be hard for them to deal with something like a landslide by themselves. After some discussion, they decided to head down the mountain early. It was better to play it safe.

Duan Ling prayed once more to the White Tiger, knowing he wouldn’t be able to return often. When he regained his rightful land, he swore, he would invite the great god into the capital to protect the empire. He would build for it a golden plinth, fill its empty eyes with precious jewels, and build a grand temple to shelter it from the elements. Duan Ling was still muttering his prayer, but Wu Du didn’t dare delay any longer. He hefted Duan Ling onto his back and hurried down the mountain.

Overnight, muddy water had rushed down the slopes and washed downstream along the rocky riverbanks. The river had surged nearly ten feet higher, and Wu Du’s pole no longer reached the bottom.

“Do we need to find somewhere to take shelter?” Duan Ling hollered over the roar of the water.

“It’s fine!” Wu Du called back, braving the rain to steer from the boat’s stern. “I know what I’m doing!”

Whenever Wu Du went into the mountains, he always traversed the river in a little flat-bottomed sampan like this. His skills navigating the water were on par with Zheng Yan’s, and he was practiced at boating through mountain floods. The little craft twisted and turned, steering clear of countless dangerous currents as they continued onward upriver.

The rainy season had come to the Jiangzuo region. Following that first night of heavy rain, a persistent drizzle fell throughout the next few days, making it impossible to keep their clothes dry. Eventually, they stripped off their robes and tried to dry them by the small stove on the boat. After being gone from the capital for a while, Duan Ling was starting to feel homesick; his thoughts were conflicted.

“I wonder how the imperial examination grading is going,” he said.

Wu Du, who’d been almost continuously damp since they left the mountain, shook out his underrobe and hung it up to dry. “I’m afraid that Cai dog will try something.”

Duan Ling smiled. “What tricks can he come up with?”

“What if he stole your exam?”

Duan Ling looked at him in disbelief. “He wouldn’t be that foolish. If my exam disappeared for no reason, wouldn’t Prime Minister Mu investigate? People aren’t stupid; even the ones who fail can check their exams afterward.”

Wu Du hummed, his brows still knitted faintly.

“Besides,” Duan Ling continued, “if he really wanted to steal my exam, what could we do about it? Are we supposed to sit next to the examination grader and keep an eye on him?”

Wu Du conceded the point and didn’t say anything else. The rain had begun to lighten, but the river had yet to recede. Once they reached the wide river mouth, Wu Du wasn’t willing to risk sailing the rest of the way. He took them ashore and rented a carriage to bring them back into the capital. When leaving the city a few days before, Duan Ling had been absorbed by the sight of the magnificent, broader world outside—but on the

way back, he ignored all those splendid mountains and rivers, wanting only to snuggle up against Wu Du in the carriage and talk.

While there wasn't much new to talk about, everything felt fresh and new on the road home. Lying on Wu Du, chatting casually with him, teasing him by pinching his ears: All of it held Duan Ling's interest. Wu Du was also gentler now than before—the viciousness he'd exhibited when they first met was gone, like a tiger who'd learned to sheathe his claws. He acceded to anything Duan Ling said without protest.

After a few days of this, their feelings only seemed to deepen. Duan Ling, thinking about how they still had nearly a week of free time left and would be with each other day and night once they returned, felt blissful.

Jiang Prefectural City was welcoming its first rainy season at the start of spring. When they arrived at the city outskirts, Duan Ling barely recognized the half-sunken pier. The Black-Plated Army soldiers all wore straw raincoats as they directed those too close to the river to move toward higher ground.

The early flooding this year had also thrown a hitch into the plans of the court. After the lengthy process of moving the capital and settling back in, Jiang Prefectural City was flourishing and crowded with people. The rich families of Xichuan had moved to the city's lowlands—and almost immediately, half of them found their courtyards were unlivable, submerged by the floods.

Horses galloped in and out of the city to report on the flooding from all over Jiangzuo County. The sudden rains were so bad nearly half the imperial examination papers the Directorate of Education was supposed to grade were either waterlogged or completely ruined.

"Report!"

Li Yanqiu had summoned all his ministers to discuss the matter. Morning court ran until noon without pausing for a meal. The emperor sat on the throne with the crown prince at his side, listening in on government affairs. The ministers arrayed themselves in an orderly fashion on the floor of the hall, the young standing and the elderly granted seats. To the left were the civil officials: Mu Kuangda; the three members of the Grand

Secretariat; the Minister of Revenue, Su Fa; and the Minister of Works, Zhao Xueli, accompanied by their assistant ministers. To the right were the generals and military officials, led by Xie You.

"This is the situation as it stands," Li Yanqiu said. "The Jiangnan area was unexpectedly flooded at the start of spring; relief rations must be allocated immediately. By the looks of it, the rain won't stop for a fortnight. Relay my orders and have your ministries make preparations. Does anyone else have a memorial to present?"

The officials were exhausted after the morning's long discussion. Mu Kuangda had asked that all the gentry within the capital—as well as from the rest of Jiang Prefecture, the Jiangnan and Runan regions, Hui Prefecture, and Huaiyin—set aside as much grain as possible to deliver to Jiang Prefecture in preparation for disaster relief in the autumn. The heavy rainfall this year would delay the spring sowing. With the paddies all flooded, the summer harvest would also be affected. The court would reduce taxes, and the distinguished families of the capital would provide relief to preemptively minimize the impact of the catastrophe. This way, when the harvest was inevitably meager come autumn, there would be no refugees roaming the streets and fomenting riots. Southern Chen had already imposed heavy taxes in Xichuan, Jiang Prefecture, and other areas for nine years to support its army. Taking seven-tenths of these prefectures' wealth in taxes had brought the country to the brink of ruin, and now, with natural disasters piled on top, the situation had become truly dire.

The newly appointed Minister of Revenue, however, backed by a group of Jiang Prefecture scholars, believed that Mu Kuangda—after bringing Xichuan to ruin, starving the people, and destroying their livelihoods—now intended to do the same to Jiang Prefectural City. This, they refused to allow. A heated argument broke out in morning court, yet Mu Kuangda remained as calm as a drifting cloud: entertaining the ministers, but refusing to yield.

"This subject has a memorial," the Minister of Revenue, Su Fa, called out.

Li Yanqiu had already made his decision and moved to dismiss the exhausted court. The second Su Fa spoke, every one of the civil and military officials glared daggers at him. Xie You barely held back the urge

to beat him black and blue. His army had been at odds with the Su and Lin families for years—not to mention that Su Fa would surely speak up in the interests of the gentry—and thus the general was feeling particularly murderous.

“The memorial, then.” Li Yanqiu held out his hand with inexhaustible patience, prepared to argue with Su Fa to the bitter end.

When Duan Ling and Wu Du entered the city, the water came halfway up the wheels of their carriage. People were shuttling their possessions up to their second floors on both sides of the street while pots, bowls, utensils, and other bits and pieces bobbed in the water. This was the first time Duan Ling had seen a city flood, and he was irrepressibly curious. Even the Mu manor was partially flooded: When they arrived, Changliu-jun was standing outside supervising as the servants moved Mu Qing’s belongings to higher ground.

“Where did you guys go?” Changliu-jun asked unhappily as soon as he spotted Wu Du.

“It flooded?” Wu Du asked back.

With a cry of dismay, Duan Ling scurried off to their courtyard to collect their things.

“Wang Shan took some time off. Prime Minister Mu approved it himself. What’s it got to do with you?” Wu Du said, finally answering his question.

“Prime Minister Mu gave *him* time off, not you,” Changliu-jun sneered. “You were summoned to the imperial palace four times. If you delay any more, good luck dealing with the consequences.”

“Summoned? By who?”

“His Majesty,” Changliu-jun replied.

Chapter 115

IN THEIR ROOM, Duan Ling tidied their things away. Fortunately, most of the herbs weren't stored on lower shelves in the first place to avoid moisture from the ground. Wu Du shouted from the gates: He had to take a trip into the imperial palace. Duan Ling was to stay with Changliu-jun.

"There's no need, is there?" Duan Ling said.

"Just stick with him," Wu Du said. "We can put this stuff away later."

"Okay, okay." He urged Wu Du to stop fussing over him and hurry on his way, but Wu Du insisted on watching him enter the Mu manor before leaving.

Yet the moment he entered, Duan Ling felt, belatedly, that something was off. He dove back into his courtyard in the rain, taking a look around outside and then peering into every corner in the hall. His intuition was screaming that someone had been in their home. He bent to check a drawer he had yet to open before whipping around to study the placement of the pillow and the tucked-under corner of the bedding. A chill ran down his spine.

Someone moved it!

Duan Ling looked around frantically, realizing it wasn't just the bed —more items had been moved around. Suddenly, he felt as if he was being watched. He set the medicine drawer aside and flew back into the courtyard like a frightened bird, instinctively looking for a safe spot.

Someone else had been here, and not just once. Where was Wu Du?

He ran out the gates through the alley toward the prime minister's manor, kicking up the water in the puddles.

"Where's Changliu-jun?!" he asked a servant.

The pressure of watchful eyes seemed to follow him like a shadow, a feeling that didn't ease until he spotted Changliu-jun.

"Changliu-jun!" he shouted.

“What’s wrong?” Changliu-jun asked, lounging on the divan with a backscratcher. He waved it at Duan Ling, observing him with careful eyes. Duan Ling was pale with fright, but he quickly regained his calm—he was only scaring himself. “Where’s Shaoye?”

“He went into the imperial palace with the prime minister,” Changliu-jun said, sitting up. “What is it? ’S something happened?”

Duan Ling shook his head, and Changliu-jun scooted over and patted the spot beside him.

“What are you doing?” Duan Ling asked, baffled.

“Taking a nap,” Changliu-jun replied. He closed his eyes and got right back to it.

How strong is Changliu-jun? He’s one of the Four Great Assassins, so he shouldn’t be afraid of Lang Junxia. With this thought, he sat down next to Changliu-jun and sank into abstraction.

“Where did you two go?” Changliu-jun asked after a time.

Duan Ling’s mind was still working over the fact that, since his room had been searched, someone must’ve been looking for the old exam papers. Only two people knew about them: Lang Junxia and Changliu-jun. And if Changliu-jun had done it, that would mean Mu Kuangda had given the order.

“Did you tidy up my room for me?” Duan Ling asked.

“Nope.”

“Ah, okay.” Duan Ling hadn’t honestly thought Mu Kuangda was behind it; after all, Mu Kuangda seemed to truly believe his story. Any secret measures he took would be pointless, and would destroy the trust he’d established.

“I really didn’t,” Changliu-jun said, sitting up again.

“Go back to sleep,” Duan Ling said with a frown. He pressed Changliu-jun down and patted him a bit, coaxing him to slumber.

It must’ve been Lang Junxia then; he hadn’t given up. Duan Ling stared in silence at the unbroken rain outside.

Wu Du dismounted outside the palace, removed his straw raincoat, and laid it across Skychaser's back. After splashing his way down a footpath, he bounded lightly up onto the corridor that led to the imperial study.

"Remove your sword," a soldier of the Black-Plated Army said, stopping him—again.

Wu Du waved at the two men guarding the study and said, earnestly, "Come here. I want to show you something."

Unsuspecting, both came forward; Wu Du flicked his fingers, and the soldiers cried out. Without sparing them another glance, Wu Du swept past them and down the corridor. The soldiers' curses followed him, but they couldn't do anything while convulsing on the ground. One soldier shouted for the other to take off his armor, and both scrambled to remove it.

When Wu Du arrived in front of the imperial study, Zheng Yan, guarding the entrance, held a hand up for him to wait. They stood by the door as Mu Kuangda's voice carried out. It was obvious the battle over disaster relief that hadn't been resolved in morning court was still being fought within the imperial study. After the ministers had taken a break for lunch, they'd resumed their rapid-fire arguments before Li Yanqiu.

Zheng Yan and Wu Du stayed silent, eyes raised to watch the rain from beneath the open-air corridor. Wu Du, recalling that Duan Ling might one day become the emperor like Li Yanqiu, wondered if he would openly ridicule self-interested ministers like Su Fa and his ilk or be polite to their faces and curse them in private. The thought was amusing, and the corners of his mouth quirked upward.

Zheng Yan gave Wu Du a strange look; Wu Du noticed his expression and stared back.

Where did you go? Zheng Yan mouthed.

Wu Du raised his eyebrows. Distractedly, he made a little man with his left hand, jerked his right thumb at himself, then formed that hand into another little man. The man on the right got closer to the man on the left and began doing all sorts of things to him…

Zheng Yan had no words. At a loss for how else to respond, he flipped Wu Du off.

Pointing at Zheng Yan, then at the ground, Wu Du conveyed that he needed to talk to him later. Zheng Yan's mouth twitched—he could guess what *that* was about. The clanking of armor approaching from beyond the gates interrupted their silent exchange. Xie You walked into the courtyard in his full suit, cloak flapping behind him. Zheng Yan and Wu Du both put out an arm, barring him from the imperial study.

"His Majesty is holding council inside," Zheng Yan said. "General Xie, please wait."

Xie You snorted coldly, then looked Wu Du up and down. "How impressive, Junior Guardian Wu."

Wu Du smirked. "Not as impressive as General Xie. Though you enter and exit the palace so often in your black armor, it's still quite clean."

The civil officials of Southern Chen had always looked down on its generals, while the generals looked down on the assassins who, as they saw it, brought chaos to the empire and its people. The assassins lacked anyone to look down on, so they could only scorn each other. However, the enemy of one's enemy is a friend: All the assassins were happy to mock Xie You for strutting around all day in his armor despite having no war to fight.

"The Black-Plated Army has received an imperial decree from every emperor in the dynasty," Xie You said in his crisp, chilly tone. "Only the commander of the Black-Plated Army, the crown prince's Grand Guardian of the upper first rank, and the crown prince's Junior Guardian of the lower first rank are permitted to carry weapons within the imperial palace. Wu Du, do you hold any of these positions?"

Wu Du stared steadily at Xie You.

The general reached behind him for his black three-sectioned staff. "If I let you get away with this today, how would I explain myself to the spirits of the late emperors? Why don't we have a duel. If you can kill me with your poison, then no one in this world may take your sword."

Wu Du laughed. "Interesting, General Xie. Did you know the White Tiger Sect has a rule? Only one person may part my weapon from me. Even the late emperor didn't dare take my Flashblade; he merely asked me to sheathe it. Just as your Black-Plated Army only acknowledges the hereditary jade pendant, my White Tiger Sect only acknowledges the

hereditary sword. If you can produce the Guardian of the Realm, I will happily offer my Flashblade to you with my own two hands. If not, then not even the founding emperor of Great Chen can take a White Tiger Sect disciple's weapon."

"Is that Wu Du outside?" Li Yanqiu called from the study.

Xie You fell silent. The voices had quieted in the imperial study.

"We are sitting right here. And though we do not have the Guardian of the Realm, we *are* the ruler of the empire," Li Yanqiu said. "Zheng Yan, take Wu Du's Flashblade and bring it into the study."

He was giving both Xie You and Wu Du an opportunity to save face.

Wu Du was silent for a moment. He removed Flashblade and gave it to Zheng Yan, who took the sword in both hands and stepped into the study.

Xie You cupped his hands and bowed. "Your Majesty, Wu Du poisoned my men. The Black-Plated Army has always been loyal and true, but my men are now covered in blisters, and their lives are at stake."

"General Xie exaggerates," Wu Du assured him. "It's only some itching powder. They'll heal in three years or so."

"Give him the antidote," Li Yanqiu ordered from inside. "Stop trying to kill each other. It's aggravating."

Face dark, Wu Du tossed the antidote to Xie You, who caught it and turned without saying anything more.

Conversation started again inside. A few minutes later Su Fa exited the study, his already sour face twisting when he spotted Wu Du. It was clear Mu Kuangda had exposed Su Fa's acceptance of bribes from the Yuan envoy, and Su Fa hated him on sight.

"Once the cunning rabbit is caught, the hound will be boiled," Su Fa hissed viciously at Wu Du. "Once the birds are shot, the bow is discarded."

Wu Du waved him closer. "Minister Su, please stay a moment. I'd like to show you something."

Su Fa, though nearing fifty, was still vigorous despite his age; he ran away in a flash, disappearing down the corridor.

"Come in," said Li Yanqiu.

Wu Du pushed the door open. To his surprise, Mu Kuangda, Cai Yan, and Lang Junxia were already inside with Zheng Yan. His Flashblade sat on the weapons rack behind Lang Junxia.

“Your sword will be returned to you,” Cai Yan said earnestly. “I don’t doubt your loyalty.”

He gestured to Lang Junxia, who retrieved Flashblade and handed it to the crown prince. Cai Yan presented the sword to Wu Du with both hands.

Wu Du accepted the blade and fastened it to his waist, understandably upset. Changliu-jun, Zheng Yan, and Lang Junxia were all able to enter the palace with their swords. Lang Junxia and Zheng Yan, as official imperial guards, held sufficient rank to do so, as well as special permission from the crown prince and the emperor—but even Changliu-jun could swagger into the palace with his sword at his side. Wu Du was the sole humiliating exception.

“Get him a seat,” Li Yanqiu ordered.

Zheng Yan dragged a table over and invited Wu Du to sit cross-legged. Li Yanqiu’s desk was placed on a low dais, so that he was seated above everyone else in the room. He looked down at Wu Du for a moment, then sighed.

“Seeing as Prime Minister Mu happens to be here as well,” he said, flipping through the memorials in front of him. “We wanted to ask you something. But seeing how unfettered you are now, free as a bird, the answer is clear.”

Mu Kuangda smiled. “My manor has housed many guests over the years, but Wu Du is the only one who never listens to me. He leaves as soon as his work is finished, keeps his hands clean, and is neither greedy nor lustful.”

“I hear from Prime Minister Mu,” Cai Yan said easily, “that you do not wish to enter the Eastern Palace because of your adopted son?”

Wu Du went quiet for a moment. At last, he spoke a single word: “Yes.”

A smile spread across Cai Yan’s face. “It’s because I keep asking to bring you into the Eastern Palace that His Majesty continues to press you so. But since you’re here today, I’d like to ask you a question. If you say no, then of course I won’t force you.”

Before Wu Du could respond, Li Yanqiu was struck by a thought. “Remind us, what is your adopted son’s name?”

“Wang Shan,” Wu Du replied. “We are not adopted father and son, but more like brothers. His father was from the generation above mine. Before he died, he left his son in my care and bade me treat him well. I will not leave his side in this life.”

Cai Yan sucked in a deep breath as he observed Wu Du, a small frown creasing his brow—but Wu Du didn’t spare him a glance, staring steadily at Li Yanqiu.

Li Yanqiu seemed to be reflecting on something. “When we saw him that day, he looked to be around fifteen. Did he take the imperial examination this year?”

“He did.”

“Have someone bring his essay here. We want to see it,” Li Yanqiu ordered.

Cai Yan’s face fell; he dropped his gaze to the table.

Li Yanqiu waved a hand. “That will be all. The rest of you may go; it’s been a tiring day. Wu Du, stay.”

“This subject son will stay too, Uncle,” Cai Yan said.

Since Cai Yan had come to the palace, he’d often referred to himself as such. Though Li Yanqiu was his uncle, he treated him as if he were his father.

Li Yanqiu, however, seemed exhausted. He had fought the ministers all day long; his energy was well and truly depleted. “Go back and rest for now. Come back in the evening to keep me company.”

“Uncle…” Cai Yan clearly wanted to protest, but Li Yanqiu waved him off again. He leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes, and fell silent, the dismissal unmistakable.

Chapter 116

CAI YAN LEFT, as did Mu Kuangda. The study fell quiet; only Wu Du and Li Yanqiu remained, with Zheng Yan keeping guard.

Li Yanqiu's deep voice broke the silence. "You don't want to enter the Eastern Palace because of our son, not anyone else."

Just as Cai Yan often called himself Li Yanqiu's son, Li Yanqiu referred to him in the same way. After all, an uncle was much like a father; Li Yanqiu had no children of his own and poured all his paternal sentiment into Cai Yan. The ministers, of course, thought this improper and had raised the issue several times, but he paid them no heed. The uncle-nephew pair thus continued to act as father and son, and addressed each other as such.

Wu Du's answer was at the tip of his tongue. His mind raced, but he held back from saying anything. There could be enemies anywhere in the palace. Even Li Yanqiu might not be trusted—and though Duan Ling didn't believe it, that was only something Duan Ling could say, not Wu Du.

"Your Majesty, you have been too kind," Wu Du said. "I have never been an official, and I'm afraid I may have offended His Highness. Some in this world find their place in the temple, others in the jianghu. Everyone has their own preference."

"It seems to us that you did not offend His Highness, but rather that he offended you." Li Yanqiu arched a brow and continued, "Our son has said more than once that he ordered you locked up that day to placate the civil and military officials, and that you would've been granted amnesty during royal pardons. As the inheritor of the White Tiger Sect, you and the empire share glory and disgrace; you thrive or perish together. So why do you hold a grudge against the future ruler of that empire?"

Wu Du held his silence. Li Yanqiu's words were reproachful, but he didn't sound angry. He vented a soft sigh. "Ever since you came down from the mountain, you've never taken the business of the court seriously. We do not know if it is because of your childish temper, or if this is what the White Tiger Sect taught you."

After another long pause, in which Wu Du sat quiet, Li Yanqiu said, “We remember it said that there was a man with a similar temper to yours, two hundred years ago.”

Wu Du remained expressionless, but Zheng Yan understood what he was driving at and snickered.

“The empire and I share glory and disgrace; we thrive or perish together,” Wu Du repeated.

“That’s right. Do you understand?”

Some things did not need to be elaborated on for understanding to be reached. Li Yanqiu could only say so much; anything more and he would diminish his own authority as emperor. Wu Du’s status was different from the other three—at least in name, he was the commander of all the nation’s assassins. His loyalty symbolized the submission of the martial world to Southern Chen’s imperial court.

Li Yanqiu knew that whether it was the late emperor, his father; or his brother Emperor Wulie, who had died for his country; or even himself and his nephew—none had ever treated Wu Du with the courtesy he deserved. Long ago, Wanlifu had helped the founding emperor of Great Chen expel the northern tribes, reclaim the land, and bring peace to the people with the Guardian of the Realm. Were Wanlifu still alive today, he would hold the same status as the emperor.

On the surface, their relationship appeared to be one of loyalty, but in reality, it was one of partnership.

Yet it was impossible to grant Wu Du such status. Firstly, Wu Du was too young. Secondly, when he’d come down from the mountain, Wu Du had failed to take up the proper duties of his sect and served Zhao Kui instead. Li Yanqiu had been holding back his anger ever since—and for this reason, the imperial family and the White Tiger Sect were at an impasse.

As it stood, Wu Du had no real power. After a century of Great Chen’s rule, the martial world existed only in name. Even if all the warriors in the land banded together, they posed no true threat to the empire.

And yet, his position remained.

He had a duty to protect the Chen Empire—but that was only a duty, not an obligation, and he must be treated with courtesy for him to fulfill that duty. The situation had given Li Yanqiu a headache on more than one occasion. If his brother were still alive, Wu Du would submit to him, but right now, he submitted to no one—not the emperor, the crown prince, or anyone else in the court, just a deceased hero. If Li Yanqiu dismissed Wu Du for good, he would lose face; if he tried to properly recruit Wu Du, he would be refused. The emperor was stuck between a rock and a hard place, unable to move in either direction.

The voice of an official drifted in from outside. “Your Majesty, the exam papers were found, but—”

“Bring them in.”

Zheng Yan opened the door, and the examiner personally brought in the box of exams. The problem was apparent at a glance: The box he held was filled with a mess of thin papers stuck together, ink seeping through the layers from water-blurred writing.

Li Yanqiu and Wu Du both stared, at a loss for words. Zheng Yan smiled and grabbed a few to feel the damp, then dropped them back in.

“It has been raining hard for days,” the examiner said, placing the soaked wooden box on the ground before kneeling beside it. In a trembling voice, he continued, “The library flooded, and most of the forty-one exam papers in this box were soaked to a pulp. I could not find Wang Shan’s paper. I think it’s in this box… Your Majesty, I deserve death for this mistake.”

Wu Du looked at Li Yanqiu in disbelief.

Li Yanqiu was also stunned. He understood natural disasters, however, and he wouldn’t blame the scholars now. The matter of the destroyed exams would be investigated and those responsible held accountable later.

“Summon Xie You,” Li Yanqiu said. “Have him bring all the candidates whose papers were ruined to the palace tonight.”

Outside, it was still raining. Duan Ling sat on the divan beside Changliu-jun, head full of thoughts. Mu Kuangda, upon returning from the palace, summoned him almost as soon as he'd stepped inside.

"I thought you'd persuade Wu Du to join the Eastern Palace," Mu Kuangda said, accepting a cup of tea from the maid. Without so much as a look at Duan Ling, he removed the cup's lid, took a few sips, and continued, "Not just anyone can be the crown prince's Junior Guardian."

"I-I didn't know," Duan Ling said. "Did that really happen?"

Mu Kuangda regarded him over the rim of his cup. "Putting aside whether you knew or not, after summoning him today, His Majesty expressed a desire to read your exam paper. He probably wants to make a deal with him. If you are summoned to the palace later, do you know what to say?"

Anxiety settled over Duan Ling, and he didn't respond.

Mu Kuangda ordered everyone else out of the room. Now they were the only two remaining. Duan Ling kept his mouth shut, but his mind was racing—he was one of the few people who knew about the accusations leveled against the crown prince. Since that night, Mu Kuangda had never mentioned it again, so he must have had a plan in mind. But as for how he was going to take down Cai Yan or whom he intended to use to do it, Duan Ling was entirely in the dark. Placing Wu Du in the Eastern Palace would give Mu Kuangda an advantageous chess piece who could get close to the crown prince and gather evidence.

As expected, Mu Kuangda said, "Disciple of mine, this move can kill two birds with one stone. Why are you hesitating?"

If Duan Ling kept dragging his feet, Mu Kuangda would become suspicious. He couldn't avoid it anymore. "You're right, Your Excellency. When Wu Du returns, I will try to persuade him."

Mu Kuangda nodded, satisfied. He continued observing Duan Ling's expression, which added to Duan Ling's unease.

"I have only accepted two disciples in my lifetime," Mu Kuangda said. "Shan-er, you and I are connected by fate."

Duan Ling knelt and bowed.

“What is even rarer,” Mu Kuangda continued, “is that you understand my intentions. Others would’ve never dared take initiative as you did at Tong Pass.”

“It was all thanks to my master’s teachings.”

“Since you understand my intent, I need not explain what comes next,” Mu Kuangda said, an abrupt change of subject.

A jolt passed through Duan Ling’s heart. There was always a hidden meaning behind Mu Kuangda’s words. It was just as he’d thought—Mu Kuangda wished Duan Ling to persuade Wu Du to enter the palace and gather evidence for the purpose of removing Cai Yan.

“Understood.”

Somehow, he’d found himself on the same boat as Mu Kuangda. He wondered what the prime minister would think of all this when he learned of Duan Ling’s true identity.

Outside the room, Changliu-jun coughed pointedly. “Your Excellency, Zheng Yan is here.”

“Finish your tea,” Mu Kuangda said. “Then go back and make preparations for what you must do. You’ve had your holiday, and I’ve given you all you need. How far you get now is up to you.”

Duan Ling took the tea Mu Kuangda handed him and drank it down. He upended the empty cup, then bowed toward Mu Kuangda again. Exiting the study, he saw Zheng Yan standing outside in the corridor.

“His Majesty summons you to the palace,” Zheng Yan said to him. “Let’s go.”

Though Duan Ling had been warned of this moments ago, he affected surprise. “Why?”

“To grant you a meal,” Zheng Yan said, smiling.

Duan Ling looked him up and down, unsure if he was joking.

They entered the palace to the racket of a crowd. Though it was approaching dusk, dark clouds gathering in the sky and rain dripping from the eaves, the palace was lively.

“Come with me,” Zheng Yan said.

Duan Ling observed the crowd from afar. Most of them seemed to be young men. “What are they here for?”

“None of your business,” Zheng Yan replied. “Don’t ask so many questions. And keep your eyes to yourself.”

He led Duan Ling to an empty hall with only a table inside.

“Sit,” Zheng Yan ordered.

Duan Ling sat. Zheng Yan turned and left, and Duan Ling felt an instinctive prickle of danger. “Hey! Where are you going?!”

“Be back soon,” Zheng Yan called over his shoulder.

Duan Ling pushed to his feet, ready to run, when he heard Zheng Yan’s voice in the corridor: “Is everything ready?”

“Yes, sir,” a guard replied.

Zheng Yan reentered the hall holding a food box, which he set on the table. He lifted the lid in front of Duan Ling. The box had four compartments, each filled with a rich assortment of colors; on the side was a bowl of milky white soup dotted with bright green flecks of floating mugwort sprouts. The only thing Duan Ling recognized was the white rice in one of the compartments, which had been topped with a pale pear blossom.

Confusion struck him.

“Eat.” Zheng Yan dragged a chair over and sat just outside the door, taking a flask from his robes.

“What… What is this?” Duan Ling asked, amazed. He tried a bite and still couldn’t tell what it was, other than delicious.

“Qiantang stir-fried pork, cabbage core, and nine-flavor stuffed lotus root,” Zheng Yan responded lazily. “Slow down. Don’t choke.”

Duan Ling did almost choke to death right then, and gulped a mouthful of soup to clear his throat.

“That’s pufferfish soup,” Zheng Yan pointed out. “Now that you’ve eaten my cooking, you belong to me; after tonight, we’ll go consummate our marriage. Wu Du’s given you to me.”

Duan Ling nearly spat out the soup, yet his first thought wasn't *This shameless bastard*—rather, it was *Thank goodness I didn't spit it out; what a waste!*

He'd never tasted such delectable food. The nine holes of the lotus root were each stuffed with a different ingredient. He could only identify five of them: fresh pork, chicken, fish, cured pork belly, and Jinhua ham. Somehow, the lotus root had been sliced as thin as paper without the filling falling out. He couldn't begin to guess how the cabbage core was prepared either, spread into the shape of a blooming flower. But the true triumph was the stir-fried pork: Soft and tender but not greasy, it left a light vinegar tang on the tongue—the salty, fresh flavor was unmatched.

In less than fifteen minutes, Duan Ling had inhaled the food box. He barely stopped himself from licking it clean. After eating Zheng Yan's food, he felt like he'd wasted the past sixteen years of his life.

How nice it would be if Wu Du could cook food like this too!

Chapter 117

DUAN LING SET his chopsticks down in the food box and closed the lid, pleasantly full.

“Cooking is like writing an essay,” Zheng Yan said in a leisurely tone from the door. “It’s important to find harmony in all the ingredients, not have one dish spicy and the next salty. You may need to find out the diner’s background, observe their reactions, and guess their preferences. The best dish is usually the one most suitable to their tastes.”

“Thanks for the lesson,” Duan Ling said with a smile. “Whoever you marry will never want to leave you.”

Zheng Yan smiled too and teased, “Food and sex are a man’s natural appetites. Come with me, and you’ll be sated from the time you wake up to the time you go to sleep. Whenever you sit, I’ll feed you tender morsels, and whenever you come to bed, I’ll let you taste delicacies that cannot otherwise be had in the world.”

Duan Ling knew if he entertained this conversation there would be no end to it; he’d only end up being teased further. He changed the subject completely and said, “Cooking is also like governing a country. Ruling a great nation is like cooking a small fish, as they say.”

Zheng Yan cleared away the food box and replaced it with the four treasures of the study—inkstone, ink, brush, and paper. He spread out the sheets of paper and said, “Now, on you write. The exams got soaked in the flooding, so His Majesty ordered a retest.”

Duan Ling had anticipated this might be the case. He nodded and opened the booklet. In it was recorded a single sentence: *He bathed his hair in the heavy rain and combed it with the strong wind, marking out the myriad countries*.

Duan Ling was struck wordless.

This was a passage from Zhuangzi’s *Miscellaneous Chapters*, from the chapter titled “All Under Heaven,” rather than a passage from the Four Books and Five Classics. He didn’t know if any of the other examinees had

read it before, but he had. *Did everyone get the same kind of question? How will the other examinees complete it?*

Zheng Yan said nothing, but lounged back on the divan and fell asleep, sword clasped in his arms. He was clearly serving as the proctor.

This question was no longer within the realm of his standard schooling. Duan Ling couldn't help but think of his father, with his fondness for Daoism: While cooking, it was "ruling a great nation is like cooking a small fish"; while learning martial arts, the process was likened to "the skilled cook butchering the ox"; for living meaningfully, one must remember that "those who conquer another are strong, while those who conquer themselves are stronger"; for living day to day, one had to "be content with what one has."

His father's love of Daoism had infected Duan Ling as well, and he'd therefore read Zhuangzi's works—which contained stories of the kunpeng, whose great wings soared in a spiral up to the top of the sky, and the faceless hundun, whose seven orifices were not yet open; about turtles who dragged their tails freely in the mud, and the twisted trees of heaven too great for the human mind to comprehend.

There was also a story about Yu the Great, that legendary ruler of old, taming the floods:

Long ago, Yu redirected the floodwaters, set the rivers free, and connected the four tribes and nine provinces. He touched three hundred famous rivers, three thousand tributaries, and countless smaller streams. Yu himself held the sack and spade and united all nine rivers in the land. No hair was left on his legs from the knee to the ankle from the waters; he bathed his hair in the heavy rain and combed it with the strong winds, marking out the myriad countries.

The saying "to toil in the harshness of the rain and wind" was derived from this story.

"Did His Majesty come up with this question?" Duan Ling asked.

“Just write,” Zheng Yan told him. “I’m merely an illiterate ruffian. How should I know?”

“You’re definitely literate,” Duan Ling replied, bemused.

Zheng Yan laughed. “If you make top scholar, I’ll take you as my teacher too.”

Duan Ling mulled it over, trying to determine Li Yanqiu’s motives for setting such a question. Was he merely thinking about the floods outside, or was there some other meaning? Duan Ling didn’t dare guess his intentions; he wrote down the words *Better to dredge than block*, and began his response with the classic tale of Yu the Great subduing the floods.

When he put brush to paper this time, his words flowed freely. He’d already written nearly a thousand words by the time a palace maid came in to light the lamps. Throughout it all, Zheng Yan sat so still as to be mistaken for a sculpture. Duan Ling’s mind was clear. He discussed ways of controlling the flow of water and likened these to governing a country. Public opinion was like water: It could carry a boat, but just as easily sink it, and too much would cause it to flood. Only by guiding it properly could a country be governed.

The second Duan Ling finished writing, relief washed over him. Suddenly he wondered where Wu Du had gone. Was he the one who’d asked Zheng Yan to stay with him?

“Where’s Wu Du?” Duan Ling asked.

Seeing that Duan Ling was finished, Zheng Yan collected the paper, rolled it up, and sealed it in a tube. He said, “Wait here.”

Zheng Yan left, and Duan Ling tensed up again, afraid that, in the brief time he was alone, an assassin would appear to take his life. Fortunately, Wu Du came in moments later, like he was taking over Zheng Yan’s shift.

“What’s going on?” Duan Ling asked at once.

Wu Du seemed nervous. He raised a slender finger to his lips, shushing him. Taking a seat beside Duan Ling, he said, low-voiced, “We can’t go back just yet. His Majesty wants to review your exam.”

He recounted what had happened. Duan Ling frowned and murmured back, “I’ve already promised Prime Minister Mu. I can’t drag my feet any longer. What should we do?”

“I’ll think of something,” Wu Du replied.

“What if we…revealed everything today?” Duan Ling had been tormented by this matter too long. Better to get it done and over than keep dragging it out in this agonizing manner. If he was granted an audience with the emperor, he could simply expose everything before Li Yanqiu. The problem, then, was what came after. He anticipated confronting Cai Yan and Lang Junxia, but he didn’t have anything to support his claim other than the two old exams stolen from the Yuan envoys.

“Do you have the papers on you?” Duan Ling asked.

Wu Du flashed his sword at Duan Ling and detached the strap that secured the scabbard to his belt, revealing the edge of a yellowed paper inside. Duan Ling took a deep breath, nodded, and reattached the strap.

“What do you want to do?” Wu Du asked.

Duan Ling’s heart was pounding. He hugged Wu Du sideways where they sat, burying his face in Wu Du’s chest.

Wu Du took him into his arms. “Don’t worry, nobody can harm you. If things go wrong, I’ll grab you and run.”

Duan Ling inhaled deeply and shook his head, trying to compose himself. “Let’s see how it goes,” he said.

This was perhaps the biggest challenge he would undertake in his life.

“If I don’t agree to enter the palace, what can Prime Minister Mu do about it?” Wu Du said. “If they force me, nobody’s going to have a good time.”

Duan Ling sat in worried silence for a moment. “Unless he and His Majesty have some reason to give up the idea, they’ll definitely force us to do it.”

Yet even as he said it, an idea slowly unfurled in his mind. Today wasn’t the best day to carry it out—but there might indeed be another option.

“Our house was searched,” Duan Ling said. “Wuluohou Mu knows about the exam papers; they must’ve thought of a way to deal with them. It won’t be as easy as just showing them to the emperor. No—we can’t expose him today, or we might fall right into their trap.”

Wu Du gave his words some thought before nodding.

“Did Zheng Yan say anything to you?” Wu Du asked. Duan Ling shook his head. “I was thinking today—Zheng Yan also saw the papers when we were patching him up, the night we came back. Did you notice?”

Duan Ling thought back to that night and slowly shook his head. Zheng Yan had been with them, but had he seen what Wu Du put in the sword case? Wu Du had been discreet; Zheng Yan couldn’t have been that attentive, right? Duan Ling’s back bristled with cold sweat. Zheng Yan had seen Lang Junxia open the secret compartment in Amugu’s scabbard. He might have guessed it had held something inside—no, it would have been obvious that it had.

At the time, he’d even said, *What sort of ruse is this?*

If Zheng Yan had kept an eye on Wu Du that night when they got home, he would have seen Wu Du slip something into his sword case. And if he was smart, he might easily guess that Wu Du had taken something from the Mongol’s scabbard and hidden it away, based on nothing more than Lang Junxia’s expression and how Wu Du reacted at the scene.

“Whose side is Zheng Yan on?” Duan Ling asked.

“He doesn’t get involved much,” Wu Du said. “In the past he worked closely with Marquis Yao, but only because of their personal friendship. It’s said the late emperor met Zheng Yan when he visited Huaiyin one year, and that the two hit it off immediately. Zheng Yan entered the palace after that. What are you thinking?”

Wu Du’s eyes roved over Duan Ling’s face as he considered Zheng Yan’s possible stance. If Duan Ling’s father were still alive, Zheng Yan might be one of the few people in the world whom he’d consider a kindred spirit.

“He didn’t do anything to you, did he?” Wu Du asked suspiciously. He suddenly seemed a little jealous.

“Of course not,” Duan Ling said in disbelief. The heavy atmosphere abruptly took a strange turn.

“Let me see,” Wu Du said, sliding a hand down Duan Ling’s side.

“We’re in the imperial palace!” he hissed back.

Wu Du ran his hands over Duan Ling’s body as Duan Ling squirmed awkwardly, then lowered his head to kiss him. After a few such kisses, Duan Ling’s breath sped rapidly.

“I want to go home,” Duan Ling said.

“Why don’t we leave now?”

They could leave, couldn’t they? Go away somewhere with no other people, somewhere they weren’t burdened with all these problems. Duan Ling’s heart warmed. No matter what happened, he still had a way out; his deliverance was sitting right beside him. No matter his identity—whether he was Duan Ling, Wang Shan, or Li Ruo—this man would never leave him.

He gazed up at Wu Du, leaned in, and kissed him firmly on the mouth.

Wu Du’s face flamed red in an instant. He covered his nose with one hand and turned away, too embarrassed to look at Duan Ling.

“Why are you blushing now?” Duan Ling asked, amused.

Wu Du was speechless, only flapping a hand helplessly. Footsteps approached as Zheng Yan returned.

“Ah,” Zheng Yan said. “Why not let me join in? It’d be the perfect opportunity for me to teach you.”

“Fuck off!” Wu Du snapped.

But Duan Ling grinned. “Come in. Let’s talk.”

On the surface Duan Ling was smiling, but his mind was working, ready to test Zheng Yan. Zheng Yan looked back at him, eyes glittering with the hint of a smile. “His Majesty summons you.”

Duan Ling’s heart stuttered. Wu Du met his eyes, and Duan Ling nodded.

“I’ll take you,” Wu Du said.

Zheng Yan and Wu Du escorted Duan Ling to the door of the imperial study, where Zheng Yan bowed and announced, “Your Majesty, Wang Shan is here.”

“Come in,” Li Yanqiu called.

Duan Ling had rehearsed this moment countless times in his head, yet the second he stepped into the study, his mind went blank. When he’d unexpectedly run into Li Yanqiu in the corridor the other day, he hadn’t been able to say a word. Even now, he still couldn’t bring himself to speak.

Li Yanqiu sat behind the desk, Duan Ling’s exam spread out in front of him. He looked up and studied Duan Ling. Duan Ling, in turn, at last got a clear view of his uncle’s face.

His appearance was so very like that of Duan Ling’s father. His brows, eyes, and nose were an exact replica of the man Duan Ling had seen countless times in his dreams. He’d been lost to him too long—and seeing Li Yanqiu, it was as if Duan Ling was thrown back into those dreams in the space of a moment.

Duan Ling had once feared that over the long, slow passage of time, he would forget his father’s face, and with it, lose the light in his heart that shone with an irreplaceable glow. But, upon meeting Li Yanqiu again, he felt a sense of deep connection. As long as Li Yanqiu was there in front of him, Duan Ling could still sense his father’s presence.

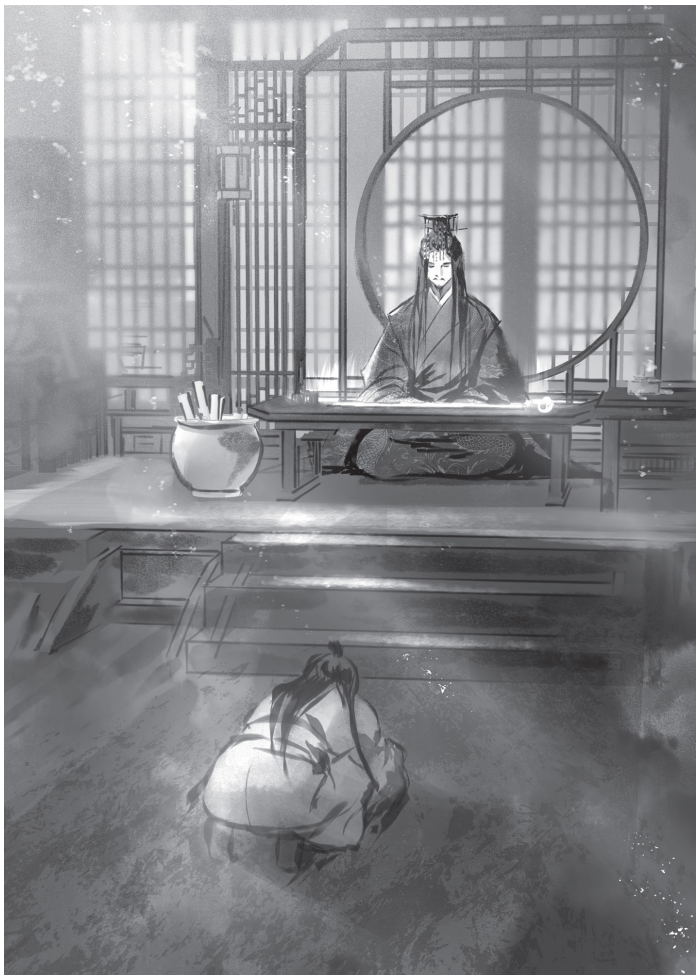
The bond was always there; it was in their blood.

“Wang Shan?” Li Yanqiu asked.

Duan Ling shook off his distraction and knelt on the ground in a deep bow.

“Wang Shan, a humble commoner, greets Your Majesty.”

“After today, you are no longer a commoner,” Li Yanqiu said. “The other papers have yet to be graded. I never thought the first one I received would be this one. Sit. I have questions for you.”



Duan Ling bowed again, then rose and settled himself at a table at the side of the room. He glanced up at Li Yanqiu, and found Li Yanqiu looking steadily back at him.

Chapter 118

THE DAY HAD BEEN long and dragging. Duan Ling had returned to the city early that morning, entered the palace in the evening, and written the exam into the night. Before he knew it, the clock had counted several hours past midnight.

Li Yanqiu was even more exhausted. He'd pitted his wits and courage against the ministers in morning court and still had to suffer more debate after court was dismissed. Bone-weary, he leaned back in his chair as they stared at each other wordlessly.

It was still raining outside. The downpour blanketed the sky, hissing down over the city accompanied by the rattle of the wind blowing against the windows.

"What's that sound?" Li Yanqiu asked in a slow, distant voice.

"Lying down at night as I listened to the wind and rain, I dreamed of iron-clad horses and frozen rivers,"[12] Duan Ling replied.

Li Yanqiu couldn't help but laugh softly. Yet in the next moment, he sighed.

Duan Ling knew Li Yanqiu must've asked Wu Du about his origins, his life story and age, whether he was married or not… He couldn't think of any other questions the emperor might have for him.

"You wrote this essay?" Li Yanqiu asked.

"Yes, Your Majesty," Duan Ling answered. *Of course I did. In these circumstances, who could possibly have helped me take the exam?*

"It reminds us of someone."

"A friend, Your Majesty?"

"He was sparing with his words and never wrote essays, but he was fond of certain sayings, such as 'I walk the great path and fear straying from it.'"[13]

Though the capital had successfully moved to Jiang Prefectural City, conflict continued to swirl under the surface of the court. If Li Yanqiu wasn't careful, the foundation Southern Chen had built up for years would crumble. He was under a great amount of pressure, burdened by the heavy responsibility of ruling a country. Duan Ling could see why Mu Kuangda's competent presence was reassuring for the Li family.

However, while there were capable ministers in the court, there were no brave warriors guarding the frontier. The biggest issue was therefore the borders. Duan Ling believed Mu Kuangda could stabilize the country; given three years' time, he would ensure all the powers within the new capital were firmly held in the hands of the central government. As to whether the Mu clan or the Li clan would direct those powers in the end, that remained to be seen.

"The world is now thriving and peaceful," Duan Ling answered. "Your Majesty has reduced mandatory labor and taxes, and the people are looking forward to living and working in peace. Even a flood like this is a temporary thing. You need not worry, Your Majesty."

"Very good. The greatest problem is the north," Li Yanqiu replied. He set Duan Ling's exam paper aside. "The glow of a pearl cannot be hidden by dust. We've read your paper, and for the sake of fairness, the exam grader will also review it. You may then serve the empire. We have no more questions; you may go. Send Wu Du in."

Duan Ling pushed open the door and left. Though their exchange had been brief, for some reason, he felt unusually tranquil. The meeting had put his mind at ease. His uncle and father, two brothers, seemed to both have a supernatural steadiness even when the world was upturned; those standing by their side would likewise not be afraid, even if the sky should fall.

Wu Du met Duan Ling's gaze, then went in. Duan Ling waited outside, glancing over at Zheng Yan—but Zheng Yan appeared lost in thought, his eyes fixed on the rain dripping off the eaves. Duan Ling's attention was similarly diverted by Wu Du's audience in the imperial study. He heard Li Yanqiu speaking softly; he seemed to be explaining something. Wu Du occasionally answered with a simple "Yes." Their conversation didn't last long before Li Yanqiu dismissed him.

He exited the study with a small nod to Zheng Yan and left with Duan Ling in tow.

“What did he ask you?” Duan Ling said.

Wu Du stood in the corridor, shook out his straw raincoat, and draped it over Duan Ling. “He asked if I’d found any clues about the Guardian of the Realm…” He stopped and turned his head, suddenly alert. “Let’s go.”

He took Duan Ling’s hand. Once they left the imperial garden, they detoured toward the palace and squeezed into a narrow lane between two buildings. He made Duan Ling walk sometimes beside him, sometimes behind, occasionally glancing up at the high walls on either side. Duan Ling finally saw it too: a figure flickering across the tops of the walls.

By the time they left the palace through the back gates, the rushing water had risen to Skychaser’s knees. Wu Du helped Duan Ling mount first, then turned the horse’s head so his bulk would block the trajectory of anything that might come down from the high palace wall.

“Hup!” Wu Du snapped the reins, and Skychaser cut through the dark water like a swift boat heading to shore.

The prime minister’s manor was as brightly lit as always on their arrival. So many things had already happened on their first day back. Now they returned dripping wet to find that the floodwaters had reached their room while they were away. Duan Ling’s drowsiness evaporated at the sight.

Skychaser had no dry place to lie down in the stable, so he couldn’t sleep either, only stand.

As Wu Du cleared the table of their luggage, Duan Ling asked, “Who was following us just now?”

“Someone from the shadow squad,” Wu Du said. “Bold of them. If it wasn’t raining, and you weren’t with me, I would’ve taught them a lesson they wouldn’t soon forget.”

Duan Ling understood right away that Cai Yan had already begun enacting a plan to get rid of him. This time, he’d only had them followed and observed; next time, he might resort to more brazen methods.

“What did His Majesty say to you?” Wu Du asked.

“Not much. He asked a few questions, but I wasn’t sure what he intended.” Duan Ling recounted their conversation to Wu Du and asked, “What did he say to you?”

“He said he changed his mind.”

“What?!” Duan Ling exclaimed in shock.

“He said I should continue to do what I’ve been doing. Since I don’t want to join the Eastern Palace, I should stay with you, and he’ll take care of the rest. He also said that, in a couple days, once the flood recedes, he has another task for me. I’m guessing he still wants me to find the Guardian of the Realm.”

“Are there any new clues?”

Wu Du shook his head. “That’s why I asked what he spoke to you about in the study.”

“He didn’t really say anything,” Duan Ling said, frowning.

“That’s strange, then.” Wu Du crossed the room and lifted the bed. To Duan Ling he said, “Put some bricks under the legs to raise it. Better to sleep higher up.”

Duan Ling helped elevate the rickety bed. It was the first time he’d experienced a flood; he didn’t know what he should do other than sit on the bed with Wu Du, not moving a muscle for fear of knocking the whole thing into the water.

“I’m sleepy,” Duan Ling said.

“So sleep,” Wu Du replied. “Try not to move too much in the night.”

Duan Ling was at a loss, but lay down carefully. “What should we do tomorrow?” he murmured, wrapping his arms around Wu Du and resting his head on his shoulder.

His life was filled with uncertainty and danger. Mu Kuangda, Li Yanqiu, Cai Yan… Many incidents and many people wove a tangled web around him, in which a single move would set off a whole chain of reactions. He needed to give Mu Kuangda a satisfactory explanation, guard against whatever Cai Yan was scheming, and prove his identity to Li Yanqiu. A host of challenging problems rose before him like an unmovable brick wall.

“Stop thinking. Go to sleep,” Wu Du said.

And he did.

By the next morning the rain had tapered off, and the sun shone in. Jiang Prefectural City was still flooded—even the Yangtze River had surged and overflowed its banks.

“Morning, sunshine!” Wu Du called into the room.

Duan Ling cracked open his eyes and saw a path of wooden boards laid on bricks stretching from the bed all the way across the courtyard to the spirit wall before turning a corner toward the gates, acting as a tiny dock.

Duan Ling burst into laughter. It was past noon, and Wu Du had done all this without making a sound. He slipped on his outer robe, tied his sash, and stepped gingerly onto the wooden boards. Just past the gate, a small wupeng boat with a stove in it waited; the kettle atop it was already boiling.

Duan Ling sat down in the middle of the boat. Wu Du combed his hair, tied it up for him, and said, “Let’s go on an adventure.”

“Wait, wait!” The troubles from last night were cast aside as Duan Ling abruptly had an idea.

This was a once-in-a-century flood, and it had occurred in the first spring after the capital’s move—an ominous sign. In the city, there was panic in the air as everyone discussed the disaster. The palace, built on higher ground, remained untouched by the worst of the flooding.

The first thing Cai Yan did upon waking early that morning was summon Feng Duo. After listening to the man’s report, he was furious.

“How long was he in the imperial study?” he asked.

“Less than a quarter hour,” Feng Duo replied. “Afterward, my men attempted to follow him. They were discovered by Wu Du and had to retreat.”

“What about his exam paper?” Cai Yan continued, his voice trembling.

“Still in the imperial study,” Feng Duo said. “His Majesty has already read it. Your Highness, no matter what we undertake now, it’s no use. His

Majesty has issued a decree for the Imperial Academy to grade exams all night long, and to begin the judging process at dawn. He said the flooding is too severe, and so grading cannot be delayed a moment longer. The results will be posted this afternoon, and the palace examination will be held in two days."

"So soon?!" Cai Yan exclaimed in disbelief.

"If we kill him after he passes the palace examination, it would be murder…murder of a court official. Your Highness?"

Cai Yan stood inside his hall with disheveled hair, breathing heavily. "Summon Wuluohou Mu," he said. "You are dismissed."

"Mu Qing!" Duan Ling called out from the bow of the boat, floating through the back alley of the prime minister's manor. Wu Du was steering the small, black-roofed craft from the stern.

Mu Qing stuck his head out from a second-floor window. Seeing Duan Ling waiting below and realizing there was fun to be had, he ran downstairs with an excited cry.

"Bring money!" Duan Ling shouted to him. "A lot of it!"

"How much?!"

"A hundred! I have your father's letter here, so let's go retrieve our cargo first."

Changliu-jun tossed down a bag of silver that hit the boat's deck with a metallic clank. Combined with Duan Ling and Wu Du's savings, they'd gathered a hoard of two hundred twenty taels of silver and forty taels of gold.

Mu Qing and Changliu-jun settled into the boat, and Wu Du steered them out of the alley and onto the main street, toward the south district. The people of Jiang Prefecture were making the most of the situation: They'd built temporary shacks on their second floors, opened up shop, and continued with business as usual. Many were rowing boats of their own, and children paddled around in wooden basins.

The capital had become a city of water overnight. Duan Ling couldn't help but find the sight exciting, and Mu Qing, who had never seen such a

thing either, was even more enthusiastic than he was. Wu Du brought them around to the Black-Plated Army's manor and spotted Xie You standing at the bow of a boat, navigating the wind and waves to patrol the city.

"General Xie," Duan Ling said, presenting the letter from the prime minister's manor. "Please sign off so we may carry out our task."

Duan Ling had gone to Mu Kuangda after he woke that morning, asking for the prime minister's written approval to withdraw grain and rice from the city stores for emergency disaster relief. He'd also brought a sizable amount of money. If there wasn't enough stored, then he would buy more—but he still needed Xie You to agree.

Mu Qing's presence was like a living token of authority. Xie You nonetheless studied Duan Ling, a young man who had two great assassins behind him and the prime minister's son at his side. Xie You signed the order, and the Black-Plated Army loaned him ten small boats for his use. Duan Ling asked the soldiers to temporarily dismantle the awnings before setting off in a mighty procession toward the warehouses outside the city. After taking on the grain, they wound back through the streets with Wu Du in the lead to distribute food to the people.

This was his home, his nation.

Duan Ling collected disaster-stricken citizens onto the boats and dropped them off on higher ground. Once he'd distributed his supplies of food, he gazed out toward the riverbank in the distance—which had become an unbroken expanse of water—and couldn't help but sigh.

Some of the people on higher ground had reached the city walls. Wu Du offered them his pole to help them climb onto the boat and took them in. After passing through the city gates, their convoy turned into a dark alley. Duan Ling shouted to both sides, "Is anyone here?! Can you hear me?"

An elderly voice rose from the depths of the flooded lane. Duan Ling spotted an old woman sitting on a second-floor terrace. This alley was closer to the lowlands of Jiang Prefectural City, and the waters had risen all the way to the second floor, submerging everything but a small area. The old woman was speaking a language nobody else understood, and she shouted down at them in a tremulous voice.

"Are you all right?" Duan Ling called up to her.

Recognizing her, Wu Du frowned slightly. She appeared to recognize him as well, but she smiled in return. Wu Du set his pole aside, clambered up onto the terrace, and carried her down on his back. She was so grateful she reached out to touch Duan Ling's brow; he lowered his head to give her easier access. Mu Qing smiled at her, and she reached over to touch his as well.

Earlier, when they'd passed World's Best Noodle Shop, the owner had handed them a box full of glutinous rice cakes after accepting the flour from the Black-Plated Army. Mu Qing removed the box's cover and shared some with the old woman.

"Her home was totally flooded," Wu Du said. "We'll have to tell the Black-Plated Army to relocate her to higher ground as soon as possible, and not to take her too far away."

"You're Xianbei?" Duan Ling asked as he peered at the old woman. He'd guessed from the cadence of her speech that she must be speaking the Xianbei language. He only understood a little bit, simple words such as "thanks" and "come," but not enough to converse.

Changliu-jun eyed Duan Ling as if seeing him in a new light. "Just how many languages do you know?"

"I used to travel all throughout the land with my father," Duan Ling said, smiling. "I know a little of everything."

When they reached an open area, a sampan passed by. The man aboard it was tall and lean, carrying a sword on his back and standing with his face to the wind: Lang Junxia.

The unexpected sight of him made Duan Ling instinctively want to shrink back; Wu Du laid a hand on his shoulder, and Duan Ling stood taller.

"Wuluohou Mu!" Mu Qing shouted.

Lang Junxia greeted them with a bow from a distance. He said something to his men, and the sampan drifted up alongside their craft. He called something else in Xianbei to the old woman, and she answered, a smile spreading across her face.

"What did he say?" Wu Du murmured to Duan Ling.

“‘I’ll pick you up and take you somewhere else; it’s flooding,’” Duan Ling whispered.

“Thank you,” Lang Junxia said impassively as he bowed and extended a hand.

The old woman nodded to Duan Ling and the others before taking the hand he offered. He gently hefted her onto his back and settled her on the sampan. As they left, he turned around and cast a last glance at Duan Ling.

The wupeng boat and the sampan went their separate ways. Duan Ling had a sudden thought—but in the presence of Changliu-jun and Mu Qing, he swallowed his questions down.

Some time later, they arrived at the meeting place they’d arranged with the Black-Plated Army. The rations had all been distributed; though they weren’t much, they would provide immediate relief during the crisis.

“Let’s split up,” Duan Ling said to Mu Qing. “We’re almost out of money, so why don’t we look around and see if anyone else is trapped.”

Mu Qing and Duan Ling agreed on a time to return to the manor for dinner. He and Changliu-jun boarded another boat and sailed off, leaving Wu Du and Duan Ling alone at last. Wu Du poled the boat across the placid water. When they passed back again through the city gates, they could see that the swollen river, which had climbed to the city walls, wasn’t as murky as the water within the city. There it had mixed with the yellow mud, but out here the water was tinted a cleaner green.

Only when they were far from the city wall did Duan Ling ask Wu Du, “Who was the old lady?”

“Someone from his tribe,” Wu Du replied. “A Xianbei woman. Look, there’s a dog. Should we save it?”

A sodden scrap of white bobbing up and down on the river resolved into a splashing white dog as they drew near. Duan Ling whistled at it, and the dog paddled toward them. It scrambled aboard the boat and shook itself vigorously, drenching both Wu Du and Duan Ling. Wu Du cursed and raised his foot to kick it back into the river, but the dog quickly darted behind Duan Ling, looking up at Wu Du with its pink tongue lolling.

A drowning dog. Duan Ling patted the creature's head, and it intelligently lay down and snuggled closer to Duan Ling.

Eventually a few tame birds joined them on the boat, followed by a cat and even two rabbits, which huddled in the corner, all rescued along the way. They'd take all of them back to the prime minister's manor when they returned in the evening.

Wu Du sat down cross-legged in the boat, deep in thought. "That old woman was Mistress Feilian. Her daughter was once betrothed to Wuluohou Mu. General Zhao Kui sent people to Wuluohou Mu's home village and spent a long time investigating his past before bringing her back."

"I never heard him mention anything like that," Duan Ling said.

"General Zhao took Mistress Feilian hostage to threaten Wuluohou Mu into going to Shangjing to take your head."

In a flash, Duan Ling recalled Lang Junxia's strange appearance in Shangjing.

"Of course, he didn't manage to do it," Wu Du went on.

Duan Ling nodded. "So that's what happened," he murmured, sinking into thought.

He'd scarcely had time to consider it when another boat approached from a distance, the man aboard shouting over the water: "You there! Help! Are there any doctors aboard? Quick, find a doctor!"

Wu Du and Duan Ling both whirled around. Before Duan Ling could say a word, Wu Du steered them toward the newcomer's boat. The man appeared to be a commoner from a village near the city, and his boat carried a soldier in the ruined armor of the Northern Expedition Army. The soldier sagged against the side of the boat, clearly unwell.

"What's wrong with him?" Duan Ling asked.

"He's sick. Who are you guys?" the newcomer asked.

Duan Ling stepped forward to take the soldier's pulse; his skin was scorching hot, and he was obviously delirious. According to the man with him, he was a messenger from the north carrying urgent news to the emperor from the city of Ye. He seemed to have wandered off the road and

gotten lost on his way. After several days of exposure to the heavy rains in Jiangnan, he'd come down with a cold, then a high fever. As Duan Ling watched, he fainted dead away.

The rain had now stopped, and Jiang Prefectural City was officially entering summer. The sun shone down onto the yellow floodwaters still pooling outside the gates of the imperial palace. The cicadas had begun to chirp as well, to the ire of the palace denizens, and the Eastern Palace had developed a musty smell no one could get rid of, as if something was slowly moldering inside.

"You can't lay a finger on him within Jiang Prefectural City," Lang Junxia said. "Even if Wu Du and Changliu-jun were out of the equation, he's untouchable. If you risk it anyway, His Majesty is sure to view you with suspicion. That's all I will say. If you don't believe me, send out the shadow squad and see. When Wu Du leaves their bodies strewn over the ground and the court and people catch wind of it, you'll have as good as confirmed his identity yourself."

"Lang Junxia, you're lying to me," Cai Yan said.

Lang Junxia declined to respond, merely taking a sip of his tea.

"There are so many ways to kill a man. I don't believe you can't do anything. You never wanted to kill him that night, did you?"

Still, Lang Junxia didn't answer.

"Say something!" Cai Yan screamed, flying into a rage as he nearly lost all control of himself.

"You're right," Lang Junxia said at last.

Cai Yan panted, heaving like a fish dying in the harsh light of the sun. He stammered through constricted breaths, "Very good… You… I knew you were lying to me all along…"

"If you truly want to end him," Lang Junxia told him, "there's one way. Feng Duo has probably thought of it."

Cai Yan, seeing a glimmer of hope, asked in a trembling voice, "How? Tell me!"

Lang Junxia arched a brow and changed the subject. “It’s time you showed yourself to your people, Your Highness. When I came in from the main street, I saw the crown prince of a nation out there saving the common people and delivering food alongside the prime minister’s son.”

Cai Yan froze, stricken. Lang Junxia nodded politely at him.

It was at that moment that Zheng Yan arrived.

“His Majesty summons the crown prince to the side hall for a meeting,” he said. “An urgent military report has arrived from Ye.”

THE STORY CONTINUES IN

Joyful Reunion

VOLUME 4

Character Guide and Glossary

Character and Name Guide

HISTORICAL PERIOD

Joyful Reunion takes place in a fictional historical setting. It takes inspiration from empires such as the Liao dynasty (916–1125 AD), the Mongol horde prior to the establishment of the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368 AD), and the Chen dynasty (557–589 AD); and from peoples such as the Xianbei and the Tangut, who existed throughout Chinese history.

As such, many of the characters in Joyful Reunion are fictionalized versions of historical figures, including the Yelü imperial family of Liao, Kublai Khan, Ögedei, and Borjigin Batu. Other characters, such as the four great assassins and the Li imperial family of Southern Chen, are created for the sake of the story.

CHARACTERS

MAIN CHARACTERS

DUAN LING 段岭: The crown prince of Southern Chen, Li Ruo (李若). Li Jianhong's only son and the heir to the Chen Empire.

WU DU 武独: One of the Four Great Assassins. A poison master who began to work for Mu Kuangda after the deaths of his first two masters, Zhao Kui and Li Jianhong.

SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

SOUTHERN CHEN

BIAN LINGBAI 边令白: The Commander of Defense at Tong Pass.

CAI YAN 蔡闫: One of Duan Ling's former schoolmates from Shangjing. A boy of Khitan and Han descent who assumed the role of the lost crown prince of Southern Chen. As the fake crown prince, he goes by the name Li Rong.

CHANGLIU-JUN 昌流君: One of the Four Great Assassins. Heavily favored by Mu Kuangda.

CHANG PIN 长聘: Mu Kuangda's chief strategist.

FEI HONGDE 费宏德: Chang Pin's shishu. An elderly Tangut advisor who lives in Bian Lingbai's manor at Tong Pass.

FENG DUO 冯铎: Former commander of Southern Chen's shadow squad. Currently a guest advisor of the crown prince.

HUANG JIAN 黄坚: A fellow student of the prime minister's manor. Duan Ling and Mu Qing's shixiong.

LANG JUNXIA 郎俊侠: One of the Four Great Assassins. Also known as the Nameless Assassin and by his Xianbei name, Wuluohou Mu (乌洛侯穆).

LI JIANHONG 李渐鸿: The late emperor of Southern Chen, posthumously known as Emperor Wulie. Duan Ling's father.

LI YANQIU 李衍秋: The emperor of Southern Chen. Duan Ling's fourth uncle.

MU JINZHI 牧锦之: Mu Kuangda's younger sister and the empress of Southern Chen.

MU KUANGDA 牧旷达: The prime minister of Southern Chen.

MU QING 牧磬: Mu Kuangda's son and Duan Ling's study companion in the prime minister's manor.

PRINCESS DUANPING 端平公主: A princess of Southern Chen. Duan Ling's fifth aunt.

SU FA 苏阀: The Minister of Revenue of Southern Chen. A man from the prominent Su Clan of Jiangnan.

WANG AN 王安: A deputy general of Tong Pass.

WANLIFU 万里伏: An ancient Han swordsman from the White Tiger Sect of Xichuan who retrieved all the pieces of the nameless sword and reforged it into the Guardian of the Realm.

WU ZUN 吴遵: One of the Grand Secretaries of Southern Chen. A man from the prominent Wu Clan of Jiangnan.

XIE HAO 谢昊: A deputy general of Tong Pass. From the same clan as Xie You.

XIE YOU 谢宥: The commander of the Black-Plated Army of Jiang Prefecture and Defender-General of the State.

YAO FU 姚复: The Marquis of Huaiyin and a prince consort of Southern Chen. Princess Duanping's husband.

YAO JING 姚静: Yao Zheng's younger cousin, sent to Tong Pass by the Marquis of Huaiyin for a marriage arrangement with Western Liang.

YAO ZHENG 姚筝: Commandery Princess Congping of Southern Chen, the daughter of Princess Duanping and the Marquis of Huaiyin.

ZHAO KUI 赵奎: Formerly the Grand General of Southern Chen and Wu Du's former master. Deceased.

ZHAO XUELI 赵薛立: The Minister of Works of Southern Chen.

ZHENG LI 郑隶: New governor of Tong Pass.

ZHENG YAN 郑彦: One of the Four Great Assassins. He is renowned for his skills in the kitchen.

LIAO

CAI YE 蔡邺: Cai Yan and Cai Wen's father, once a great scholar of the Central Plains. Deceased.

DUAN XIAOWAN 段小婉: Duan Ling's mother, a commoner. Deceased.

XUNCHUN 寻春: The madam and owner of Qionghua House in Shangjing. Wu Du's shijie. Deceased.

YELÜ DASHI 耶律大石: The former Great Prince of the Northern Court and the chief of the Liao Empire's Northern Court. Killed defending Shangjing from the second Mongol invasion.

YELÜ ZONGZHEN 耶律宗真: The current emperor of Liao.

WESTERN LIANG

HELIAN BO 赫连博: One of Duan Ling's former schoolmates in Shangjing, a Tangut royal with a stutter. He goes by the alias He Mo.

HELIAN DA 赫连达: Helian Bo's uncle, the Grand Preceptor of Western Liang.

SHANG LEGUAN 赏乐官: Son of a high-ranking official in Western Liang.

YUAN

AMUGU 阿木古: The strongest warrior of the Yuan Empire.

BORJIGIN BATU 布儿赤金拔都: A Mongolian boy who was one of Duan Ling's schoolmates in Shangjing. He is currently vying for the throne in Yuan along with his father, Kuchi.

BORJIGIN KUCHI 布儿赤金奇赤: Batu's father.

Khatanbaatar **哈丹巴特尔**: An emissary of Yuan. The last disciple of Nayantuo and one of the top assassins of the Western Regions.

Ögedei **窝阔台**: A Mongolian general and Kublai's third son.

OTHER

HELAN JIE 贺兰羯: A dangerous assassin with an iron hook for a hand.

MASTER KONGMING 空明法师: A bad-tempered old monk who presided over the Northern Temple. His sect once possessed the sword Ender of the Profane before it was stolen by his traitorous shidi.

MASTER WANGBEI 忘悲大师: Master Kongming and Helan Jie's master.

MISTRESS FEILIAN 费连氏: An elderly Xianbei lady from the same tribe as Lang Junxia. Her daughter was once betrothed to him.

NAYANTUO 那延陀: The former number one assassin of the Western Regions who established the Yulin Sword Sect. He was killed by Li Jianhong.

Name Guide

NAMES, HONORIFICS, AND TITLES

Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a disyllabic name.

DA-: A prefix meaning "big" or "elder," which can be added before titles for elders, like "dage" or "dajie," or before a name.

LAO-: A prefix meaning "old." Usually added to a surname and used in informal contexts.

XIAO-: A prefix meaning "little" or "younger," which can be added before names or titles for juniors like "xiaodi." Often used in an affectionate and familiar context.

-ER: Affectionate diminutive. A suffix meaning "son" or "child." Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a disyllabic name.

Family

DI/DIDI: A word meaning "younger brother." It can also be used to address an unrelated (usually younger) male peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

GE/GEGE: A word meaning "elder brother." It can also be used to address an unrelated male peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

JIE/JIEJIE: A word meaning “elder sister.” It can also be used to address an unrelated female peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

TANGGE: A word meaning “elder paternal male cousin.”

TANGJIE: A word meaning “elder paternal female cousin.”

XIONG: A word meaning “elder brother.” It can be attached as a suffix to address an unrelated male peer.

XIONGDI: A word meaning “brother.” It can be attached as a suffix to address an unrelated male peer.

Martial Arts and Tutelage

SHIBO: One’s shifu’s older male peer.

SHIDI/SHIMEI: One’s younger peerage. Shidi is one’s younger brother and Shimei is one’s younger sister.

SHIFU: One’s trade teacher or master. Otherwise known as the Teacher-Father.

SHINIANG: Shifu’s wife. Otherwise known as the Teacher-Mother.

SHISHU: One’s shifu’s younger male peer.

SHIXIONG/SHIJIE: One’s older peerage. Shixiong is one’s older brother and Shijie is one’s older sister.

SHIZHI: One’s peer’s male disciple.

Other

GONGZI: Young man from an affluent household.

LAOYE: A title for the head of a household.

-QING: A term of familiar address from an emperor toward one of his ministers.

SHAOYE: Young master.

GLOSSARY

COURTYARD HOUSE (SIHEYUAN): Traditional Chinese architecture is centered around an open rectangular space, the courtyard, with multiple individual halls built on three sides. The more lavish the residence, the more courtyards and structures it will have. Mansions and palaces will contain many such courtyards, each with a different master or mistress.

A standard courtyard house has two courtyards: the outer courtyard and its associated halls meant for receiving guests, and a private inner courtyard and its associated halls that serve as living chambers. The private courtyard is always on the opposite side of the grounds from the entrance gate. Corridors run the outer perimeter of the yard, connecting the various halls, and may have seats installed in the railing. The courtyard itself may be simply paved or may contain gardens and walkways.

FOUR BOOKS AND FIVE CLASSICS: The canon of Confucian texts that became central to both primary education and the imperial examinations. The Four Books are: *The Analects*, *The Doctrine of the Mean*, *Great Learning*, and *Mengzi*. The Five Classics are: *The Book of Songs*, *The Book of Documents*, *The Book of Rites*, *The Book of Changes (I-Ching)*, and *The Spring and Autumn Annals.*

GEOGRAPHICAL REGIONS: Geographical regions are informal, nonadministrative regions that refer to a specific area in relation to a major landmark, such as a river or a pass, and will usually have a cardinal direction as a suffix:

· dong: area east of the landmark

· xi: area west of the landmark

· nan: area south of the landmark

· bei: area north of the landmark

· zhong: central, or the area in between two major landmarks.

For example, Jiangnan, “south of the river,” refers to the region south of the Yangtze River, and Guanxi, “west of the pass,” refers to the region west of Tong Pass.

IMPERIAL STATE EXAM: A civil service examination system for selecting candidates for state bureaucracy. Achievements in civil service and scholarship brought the highest prestige for any citizen, regardless of background. There were several levels to the imperial examinations:

PROVINCIAL EXAM: This examination, the lowest level, tested candidates at the provincial level.

METROPOLITAN EXAM: The second stage of the imperial examination took place within the imperial capital every three years, in the spring following the provincial examination. Those who passed earned the title of gongshi.

PALACE EXAM: The final stage of the imperial examination took place inside the imperial palace, and was overseen by the emperor himself. Those who passed earned the title of jinshi and were qualified to become officials by imperial appointment.

GRACE EXAM: The name given to metropolitan and palace exams that took place outside the normal three-year cycle by special grace of the emperor.

STUDENT REFERRAL: A student wishing to sit the metropolitan exam required the referral or recommendation of a current or former government official. The student would therefore become an official disciple under the house of the official who recommended him.

JIANGHU: A staple of wuxia and xianxia, the jianghu (**江湖** / “rivers and lakes”) describes an underground society of martial artists, monks, rogues, artisans, and merchants who settle disputes between themselves per their own moral codes.

LAWFUL AND COMMON-BORN RELATIONSHIPS: Upper-class men in ancient China often took multiple wives. Only one would be the official wife, and her lawful sons would take precedence over the common sons of the concubines. Sons of lawful birth were prioritized in matters of inheritance. They also had higher social status and often received better treatment compared to the common sons born to concubines or mistresses.

OFFICIALS AND RANK SYSTEM: Civil and military officials were classified in nine hierarchic ranks, with the first rank being the highest. Their salaries ranged according to their rank. The imperial examination was one path to becoming a court official, the other being referral by someone in a position of power, such as a noble, a eunuch, or another official.

QI AND ACUPOINTS IN MARTIAL ARTS: Qi is a vital force that courses through the body in channels known as meridians. Acupoints are specific spots on these meridians that are said to stimulate the central nervous system in characteristic ways. A martial artist cultivates the qi in their body and manipulates it as a form of energy, either to boost themselves internally or expel it as a form of attack.

QINGGONG: Literally “lightness technique,” qinggong (**轻功**) refers to the martial arts skill of moving swiftly and lightly from one point to another, often so nimbly it looks like one is flying through the air. In wuxia and xianxia settings, characters use qinggong to leap great distances and heights.

QIXI FESTIVAL: Qixi is known as the Crafter’s Festival, a celebration of deft hands that takes place on the seventh day of the seventh month.

Legend has it that a celestial maiden, the weaver girl, came to earth and married a cowherd. Despite wanting to stay on earth with him and their children, she was forced to return to heaven by her father, the Jade Emperor. The cowherd tried to follow her on an oxcart but was stopped at the Milky Way, a silver river cutting through the sky that separated the two lovers. On a single day of the year, Qixi, magpies swarm together and create a bridge that allows the cowherd and the weaver to reunite. Thus, Qixi is also known as a celebration of romantic love.

SEAL SCRIPT: Ancient style of Chinese writing developed during the Qin dynasty, named for its usage in seals, engravings, and other inscriptions.

TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE: A holistic system of medicine used throughout most of Chinese history. Herbal and animal byproducts were boiled into decoctions, ground up and baked into pills for ingestion, or applied as poultices to treat injuries.

About the Author

Fei Tian Ye Xiang (Arise Zhang) is a Chinese novelist who has been active since 2008. A romantic who crafts fantasy worlds suffused with eastern mythology, he has published a number of books in places such as Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, and Germany. Many of his works, including *Legend of Exorcism* and *Dinghai Fusheng Records*, have received manhua and popular animated adaptations. He considers writing to be the act of bringing boundless adventure to the mundane life of the real world, allowing his readers to follow his characters in exploring the endless possibilities of time and space. He hopes every world will leave his readers with everlasting memories.

Footnotes

Chapter 90

[1] Two lines from the poem “To Assistant Magistrate Han Chuo of Yang Prefecture” by Tang dynasty poet Du Mu.

Chapter 93

[2] The Four Pillars of Destiny, also known as the eight characters, is a divination method in which the characters assigned to a person based on the time of their birth signify their destiny. This method is often used to determine if two people are compatible in marriage.

Chapter 95

[3] Lines from “A Letter to Huang Jifu” by Song dynasty poet Huang Tingjian.

Chapter 97

[4] Guidance from Chapter 3 of The Art of War by Sun Tzu.

Chapter 99

[5] Lines from “Song of the Yue Boatman,” a famous love song first recorded in Shuoyuan, compiled by Western Han dynasty scholar Liu Xiang.

Chapter 101

[6] A Chinese politician from the Spring and Autumn period, born 720 BC, died 621 BC, legendary for his unimpeachable virtue.

Chapter 102

[7] An advanced scholar who has passed the palace examination, the highest level in the Chinese imperial examination system.

Chapter 104

[8] Lines from “Tao Yao,” an ancient poem preceding the Qin dynasty, recorded in the section “Airs of the States: Odes of Zhou and the South” from The Book of Songs.

Chapter 111

[9] An elder peer under the same master, equivalent to an older brother.

Chapter 112

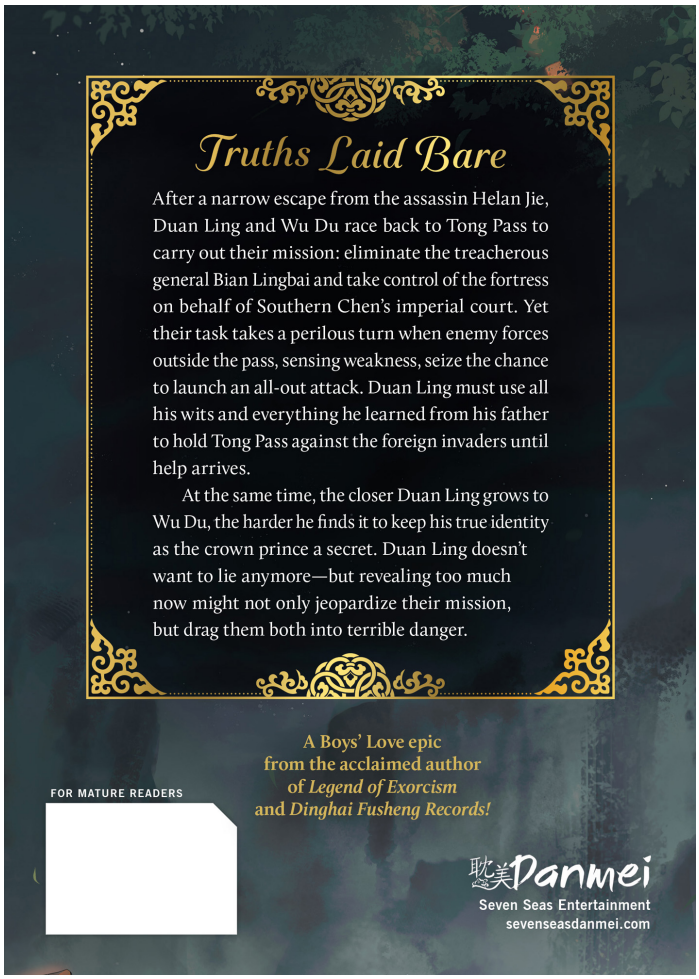
[10] Lines from “Gazing at the Mountain” by Tang dynasty poet Du Fu.

[11] Lines from “Peach Blossoms in Dalin Temple” by Tang dynasty poet Bai Juyi.

Chapter 118

[12] Lines from “Written in a Storm” by Southern Song dynasty poet Lu You.

[13] A line from Chapter 53 of Dao De Jing by Laozi.


Truths Laid Bare
After a narrow escape from the assassin Helan Jie, Duan Ling and Wu Du race back to Tong Pass to carry out their mission: eliminate the treacherous general Bian Lingbai and take control of the fortress on behalf of Southern Chen's imperial court. Yet their task takes a perilous turn when enemy forces outside the pass, sensing weakness, seize the chance to launch an all-out attack. Duan Ling must use all his wits and everything he learned from his father to hold Tong Pass against the foreign invaders until help arrives.
At the same time, the closer Duan Ling grows to Wu Du, the harder he finds it to keep his true identity as the crown prince a secret. Duan Ling doesn't want to lie anymore—but revealing too much now might not only jeopardize their mission, but drag them both into terrible danger.
A Boys' Love epic
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of Legend of Exorcism
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